Alan Plater

Learning the Facts of Life: Forty Years as a TV Dramatist

Back in 1977, Alan Plater contributed an article to TQ25 celebrating twenty-five years as a writer for stage and television. But his first play for television was not screened until 1962 – hence the different anniversary which here provides the occasion for his reflections on changes in the medium and its treatment of drama (and dramatists) over the succeeding four decades. As a stage writer, he established special relationships with Stoke-on-Trent, Humberside, and the North-East – where his *Close the Coalhouse Door* played to tremendous local acclaim, but to metropolitan disinterest when it reached the West End. But while his stage work has remained resolutely committed to the parts the critics seldom reach, as a writer for television he has both kept his own entirely distinctive voice, as in the *Beiderbecke* sequence, and remained an ever-reliable contributor to series from *Z Cars* in the 'sixties to *Midsomer Murders* in the new millennium, with excursions into glossy period dramatizations such as the seven-part *Fortunes of War*. Here, he reflects on the losses of spontaneity and creative freedom which have accompanied technical innovation and increasing bureaucracy, and offers some hopes for changes in direction to restore what was once the glory of British TV drama. This article is based on an inaugural lecture Alan Plater gave at the University of Bath in March 2002.

MY FIRST TELEVISION PLAY was screened in October 1962, almost forty years ago. Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister, the top-selling single was 'Telstar' by The Tornadoes, and there were teams in the Football League called Accrington Stanley, Bradford Park Avenue, and Bournemouth and Boscombe Athletic. On top of all that excitement, the world was bracing itself for possible extinction because of a little local difficulty called the Cuban Missile Crisis.

My play was called *The Referees* and had nothing to do with football. It was recorded at the old Dickenson Road studio of the BBC in Manchester. The studio, originally a church, later became the headquarters of Mancunian Films, creators of epic movies starring great men like George Formby, Sandy Powell, and Frank Randle.

There was a ten-day gap between the play's recording and transmission and this is where the Cuban Missile Crisis comes into the tale. The play was finished, and I walked along Dickenson Road to the hotel where I was staying. This was worth a play in itself. It was used mainly by commercial travellers all of whom had the desperate demeanour of Willie Loman, and was run by a woman who claimed to be Elia Kazan's niece. Is it any wonder my work comes out wacky at times?

But the serious point is this. As I walked home, I prayed with all the fervour of a devout atheist to any God who might be out there and paying attention. The gist of the prayer was: go ahead and let them drop the bomb and destroy the planet Earth if they must, but make them wait until after the play is shown. If I'm going to be incinerated, let it be with one television credit.

There's a simple fact of life hiding inside that anecdote. Every play you write is the most important event that has happened in the entire history of the human race and simultaneously it doesn't a matter a damn. If you can't live with this contradiction, don't bother even trying to be a writer. That's why most of the best playwrights are Irish or Jewish. They get along fine with contradictions of any kind. For the record, my grandfather was Irish and my wife is Jewish.

The same applies, obviously, to painting pictures or making music. I've written five

novels over the years, and while working on them tried to keep away from libraries and bookshops. One look at those shelves and you are bound to say: why bother writing another book? I know there are hundreds of plays in the world, but they don't sit in rows looking at you to check whether you're wearing any clothes.

Let's call that Fact of Life Number One. Writing a play is an act of extraordinary arrogance and, in the broad sweep of history, is totally irrelevant.

Patronage and Public Service

Let me move on to Fact of Life Number Two. These are not in order of priority, by the way, but in the order they occur in the story. Number Two is this: a playwright cannot exist without a patron. Indeed, you could write a very persuasive history of the arts based on the influence of patrons on the process. I believe it was John Berger who first pointed out that the tradition of landscape painting in this country stemmed in part from the needs of lords and landowners to assert their territorial rights in oils on canvas and, by implication, keep the peasants in their place.

In that respect, my generation of television playwrights was lucky. Our principal patron was the BBC, aided and abetted by a fledgling commercial television network created with a sturdy public service principle at its heart. Being totally democratic in intention, this public service principle was, naturally, later demolished by Margaret Thatcher, and New Labour shows few signs of restoring it.

But I was even luckier. My patron was the BBC North Region, at a time when it had genuine autonomy. Even better, the patronage came in the form of a single human being, the late Vivian Daniels. Vivian produced and directed eight plays a year, working from the Dickenson Road studio: one every six weeks. I once mentioned this in a Radio 4 interview, and apparently a very senior executive from BBC Television Centre phoned the programme to question what I had said. He apparently couldn't believe that the North of England could ever have been trusted to make plays without reference to important chaps like himself in London. But we were and we did. Much the same thing happened in Glasgow, Belfast, and Cardiff, and later on in Birmingham.

Fact of Life Number Three is, therefore, a quote from my old friend, the late Henry Livings: distance from headquarters adds enchantment. Henry was another writer who flourished under the patronage of Vivian Daniels.

We have to put this in the industrial context of the times. In the 1960s there were two and sometimes three plays on each television channel every week. That adds up to over two hundred original plays a year. There was neither the time, the will, nor the necessity for extensive rewrites. The process was simple, quick, and cheap. When I was writing for *Z Cars* I would deliver a script and it would be shown, live, on screen six weeks later. These days it takes six weeks for anyone to return a phone call.

It should also be acknowledged that not all the plays were good. No civilization has yet produced two hundred memorable plays in a year and ours was no exception. But – as in Elizabethan England – the more work that is produced the better the chances that work of high quality will emerge. Kingsley Amis was wrong: more means better.

It was in many respects a cottage industry. Sometimes in workshops I show the opening of *A Smashing Day* – first shown on BBC TV in 1963, and the earliest surviving example of my work– and have the participants play the game of identifying the actors. They were Alfred Lynch and the late John Thaw, doing one of his early Jack the Lad performances. Alfie Lynch played Lennie, a crumpled young man with the soul of a poet – a recurring figure in my early plays. Twenty-five years later he had become Trevor Chaplin in the *Beiderbecke* series. I always deny any autobiographical tendencies in this phenomenon though you may wish to say: ho hum.

There were only two captions, one reading A SMASHING DAY and the other reading BY ALAN PLATER. And the point is that I made them myself. I originally trained as an architect in the 1950s, in the long shadow of

Scene from the early television play by Alan Plater, *So Long Charlie*, transmitted in May 1963. Left to right: Angela Douglas, John Thaw, and Francis Matthews. (Photo: BBC.)

the Beaux Arts tradition, when it was assumed that you wouldn't be able to design a decent bungalow if you couldn't do Roman lettering. I'd muttered quietly about the captions for two earlier plays, whereupon Vivian said: 'If you don't like the captions, why don't you do your own?' So I did, in white poster paint on black card. This is a theme I shall return to.

The music happened in a similar home-spun way. I had recently bought an EP of the *Back Country Suite* by the American blues piano player and singer, Mose Allison, and suggested it to Vivian as introductory music. 'Bring it along to the studio', he said. 'Let's try it.' And that's how opening sequences were made. The play was well liked when it was shown, and got me my first rave notice – so much so that I know it by heart: 'The voice of *Coronation Street* with the spirit of Chekhov.' Well worth learning, I know you'll agree. And in a world of two black-and-white channels, it was number seven in the ratings, not that anybody bothered about ratings in those days. Funny old-fashioned creatures that we were, we bothered about the plays and how we made them.

They were shot entirely in the studio. That was the deal. You were given this large empty space and invited to fill it with your imagination. In practical terms this usually meant about eight interior settings and a couple of corners. Filming was a luxury and required a note from the headmaster.

Early Days at Pebble Mill

But there was no limit to what could be achieved, if you trusted the imagination of the play-makers and the audience. I wrote a half-hour play called *See the Pretty Lights*, all of which took place on the end of a seaside pier at night. We built the end of the pier and, aided by false perspective and a cyclorama of the seashore in the background, it worked.

Several factors were in our favour. We were working in black and white, which is essentially dramatic, and we were working with in-house technicians. We had people on lighting, sound, and cameras who knew the studio inside out and what could be achieved – which was, frequently, the impossible. The writers were trusted and – crucially – we trusted the audience.

What followed over the years was entirely predictable. Dickenson Road studio was abandoned and replaced by a new, all-mod-con studio, officially designated not suitable for drama. The North Region drama department ceased to exist and Vivian Daniels moved on and was never replaced. A few years later, the new studio was re-designated as suitable for drama because the studios at Television Centre were full. In effect, the Manchester studio became just an overflow facility for London. There's another Fact of Life there, but spelling it out would be too depressing.

Ten years have passed by: it's 1974, and David Rose, the original producer of *Z Cars*, is now at Pebble Mill in Birmingham with the title Head of Drama (English Regions). He became my principal patron. In that role he gave television debuts to people as diverse as Alan Bleasdale and Mike Leigh – and dozens of others.

David encouraged me to write *Trinity Tales*, a six-part series inspired by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In our version, the pilgrims are travelling to Wembley for the Rugby League Cup Final where their team, Trinity, are playing. The characters are all based on Chaucer's. The Wife of Bath, for example, becomes the Wife of Batley. On the journey they tell stories, also based on Chaucer's original tales.

Again, the only credit was mine: ALAN PLATER'S TRINITY TALES. The writing credit was repeated at the end, along with the acting and technical credits. In the late 1970s I showed *Trinity Tales* at a writing workshop in Toronto and that was what impressed them most: that the writer could have front and back credits. It would have been impossible in North America even then. It is impossible anywhere now.

Francis Matthews played the Prologue. He spoke a linking narrative throughout the series in rhyming couplets, frequently addressed directly to the camera – inviting the audience to take part in the conspiracy that is at the root of all drama. We had original songs and music by Alex Glasgow, and the actors playing the pilgrims also played all the characters in the individual stories within the journey. But even that wasn't complicated enough for us. We also did a stage version with the same company at the Birmingham Rep which broke the existing house records, prior to shooting the television series.

Even though this was only ten years on from *A Smashing Day*, technically we had moved on quite dramatically. The series was a blend of traditional studio scenes and location filming, which was no longer a luxury for special occasions. I also recall that Pebble Mill had just taken delivery of an early lightweight video camera and we used that for all the scenes in the minivan which the pilgrims used for their journey to London. That was very much in the spirit of the times: here's a new thing, let's try it to see what happens.

The Peak of Television Drama?

The series overall has a jolly, rough-hewn quality that's all of a piece with the material. I've talked about it at some length for one very simple reason: it's almost impossible to

imagine such a project being made today. In retrospect, it seems clear to me that the 1970s represented the peak of television drama in this country from the writer's point of view – and that, of course, is the only one I've got.

There is a still a treasure chest of material at Pebble Mill, made under David Rose's benevolent patronage, that would hold its own on the networks today. It was drama with more imagination to the square foot than anything we see today. It seems odd that while comedy shows from the 1970s are repeated regularly – and in the case of *Dad's Army* and *The Likely Lads*, they're always welcome – drama rarely gets a showing. Apart from Mike Leigh's wonderful *Nuts in May*, I can't remember seeing anything from David's Pebble Mill period in the last fifteen years. A David Rudkin retrospective wouldn't be a bad start.

Incidentally, David Rose's post, Head of Drama (English Regions), disappeared long ago and the Pebble Mill studio became a valuable bit of real estate.

Lurking inside the story so far is a significant and in some ways lethal technical change: the move from the studio to outside locations. The last traditional studio play I wrote was in 1984, and in a way it told its own story. It was called *Thank You Mrs Clinkscales*, and was a more or less autobiographical account of a New Year's Eve party held in the early 1950s by a gang of lads on the cusp between sixth form and university. One of the lads brings a girl with him, a sure sign that the world is changing. It's the last time the gang will ever assemble.

That's the story. The bones of it are true, but I played a few games with the flesh. The setting was a terrace house on the outskirts of Hull. The play was produced by Yorkshire Television and the designer travelled over one day to look at the real house where the party took place, to enable him to build an accurate replica in the studio. In the event, the house next door was empty, identical, and for sale. The sale price was twelve thousand pounds – exactly the same as the cost of building the studio replica. Even we could spot the contradiction. Studio sets, once the show was over, were destroyed, though there was a poverty-stricken theatre in Yorkshire with an unofficial licence to raid the Yorkshire Television rubbish dump at regular intervals. I know this because I helped negotiate the deal.

The lethal part of this transformation was the change in emphasis on the respective roles of writer and director. A sixty-minute studio play was generally shot in two days. The writer sat in the gallery with the grown-ups, and was able to keep an eye on deviations from the text and the intentions of the piece. A sixty-minute film is shot in bits and pieces, on a variety of locations, over a period of two or three weeks and the writer has the choice either to be an obsessive neurotic and sit on the director's shoulder the whole time, or to stay at home where it's warm and trust the director to get it right. I've always opted for the latter, not least because film-making is one of the most boring activities ever invented by the human race: hours of tedium punctuated by bacon sandwiches and spasms of collective neurosis. Jack Rosenthal's *Ready When You Are, Mr McGill* tells you all you need to know about film-making.

Children of the War – and 'Fortunes of War'

I keep coming back to the word 'trust'. Drama in any form is a collective enterprise. We have to trust each other's talent. This attitude is probably at its peak in the theatre, and it is worth pointing out that most of the key players in the television drama of the 1960s and 1970s had a theatrical background, either in terms of the actors, directors, or both. They brought with them a respect for text, and a respect for each other's talent.

There was a downside too. Some of the older actors, who had spent a lifetime in weekly rep and speaking up so they could be heard at the back of the gallery, found the new challenge of playing to a camera six feet away an awkward transition. In the words of the old comedians: nobody sleeps while I'm on. This was all part of the package. We can only behave according to the norms of our own generation.

But I think there was another aspect of that generation that is always overlooked in

the context of this debate. All of them were children of the Second World War. Robert Barr, who wrote episodes for *Z Cars* and *Softly Softly*, had been a BBC war correspondent, and most of the senior positions in broadcasting were filled by people – mostly men, it has to be said – who had seen active service. I know of one key figure in drama who had flown bombing missions over Germany. That being so, he was not likely to be frightened by a strong memo from a channel controller – and he wasn't. I've always believed that one of the central ingredients of British television in the 1960s and 1970s was fearlessness bordering at times on recklessness. If writers are to do their best work, we need brave patrons in high places.

Now let's move on another decade, to 1987 and *Fortunes of War*, a seven-part dramatization of Olivia Manning's six novels about the Second World War. Now even as I write those words, I can feel the old contradiction rearing its head: if there were six novels, why not six episodes? Quite so. When the project was first mooted I reacted in the obvious way. Let's make six films and if they come out at different lengths, why should that be a problem? After all, Olivia Manning was under no obligation to make all her books the same length and the BBC, as a public service channel, should be able to offer the same freedom.

The answer was no. The BBC was looking for seven hour-long episodes that could be sold around the world in an attractive package and that was the end of the argument. My task was to transform over sixteen hundred pages of paperback into seven hours of television.

How did I do it? Well, the most interesting answer is: very quickly. I spent about two months working on the narrative structure of the piece, in association with Betty Willingale, the producer, and then – wait for it – I delivered a script every three weeks for twenty-one weeks. I subsequently did some further tweaking and polishing, but ninety per cent of what appeared on screen was in those first drafts. There's a vogue at the moment for saying good screenplays are not written but rewritten. No writer believes this. The first draft will always be the best because that's when the passion is at its highest.

With an overall budget around six million pounds, this was the most expensive series ever made by the BBC up to that point. The film director, Richard Lester, phoned me after the first episode saying – and I paraphrase – 'Where did you get your money and may I have their telephone number?'

And the whole series was a terrific piece of film-making. Three people are named in the credits – Betty Willingale, our director, James Cellan Jones, and me. We all trusted each other implicitly. We were, and remain, creatures of the old school. It's also interesting to note that our stars, Ken Branagh and Emma Thompson, didn't get star billing at the top of the show, even though they deserved it.

Another fact of life: I was now living and working on a different planet from the one that gave us *A Smashing Day*. No longer was I making my own caption cards and turning up at the studio with a record that might be suitable to play over the opening titles. For all practical purposes, we were now making movies. We were making things to last. It was Orson Welles who pointed out that film lasts for ever, because it comes in cans. That has to be kept in mind when bandying figures like six million pounds around the debating chamber.

Old-style television like *A Smashing Day* was designed to be seen once only. The normal way of preserving it was by a technique called telerecording, which involved pointing a film camera at the television screen as the programme was transmitted and, literally, filming the result. It was cumbersome, expensive, and technically messy, but that's how most vintage programmes survived, if they did.

But if you spend millions of pounds on a programme with a long life there is, at least, a theoretical possibility of getting some of it back over the years, by way of sales around the world, repeat transmissions on the proliferating channels that now girdle the earth, and from video, DVD, and whatever they invent next week. Profits are not unknown. I have to confess I'm not consumed with any

great urgency to see the long-term balance sheets of shows I've worked on. But seen from my small corner, it's obvious that money is made over a period. For example, *Barchester Chronicles*, which we made twenty years ago, has, to date, sold getting on for sixty thousand copies on video in the UK alone.

It's good to think that your work, instead of being seen once and then instantly forgotten, might have some sort of permanent existence on the shelf of the local video store and (theoretically anyway) in the hearts and minds of the nation. But what we have lost is what we had in those early, innocent days: the shortest possible route to the audience. The idea of a multi-million dollar cottage industry is a contradiction in terms.

Lessons of a Multi-Million Project

Let's examine a multi-million dollar project, my film *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells*, seen on BBC in the year 2000, starring Dame Judi Dench in an award-winning performance – that being the only sort Judi is capable of – along with Sir Ian Holm, Dame Cleo Laine, and commoners who included Olympia Dukakis, Billie Whitelaw, June Whitfield, Leslie Caron, and the late, much lamented Joan Sims.

A shameful confession. When people ask me how we assembled such a brilliant cast I say: we sent them the screenplay. Forgive me. But even a superficial study of the opening titles shows how dramatically the industry has changed since 1962. Upfront we have the names of various production companies who put up the money which, eventually, was about three and a half million pounds. It's even more complicated than that. At the time of shooting, Working Title was owned by Polygram, which was owned by Universal, which was owned by Seagram, suppliers of hard liquor to the planet earth. I didn't even suggest making my own caption cards.

Judi and Ian have their names above the title, which doesn't worry me, as it was their loyalty to the project that focused the minds of the men with access to global capital. Then we have all the other star names, plus the main technical credits and, nestling cosily among them, the director and writer. That doesn't worry me either. Many highly talented people worked on the film, and they should receive proper credit. The question is: why do it at the start of the film, when all we want is to get on with the story?

The complication is this. BBC thinking – based, no doubt, on extensive research with focus groups borrowed from the political parties between elections – determines that end-credits should run no longer than ninety seconds. Any longer than that and we're all likely to start zapping to ITV, Channel 4, or even Channel 5, and it's obviously a short step from that to the downfall of civilization as we know it.

In any case, the end-credits these days are generally squeezed into one side of the screen while we are shown a trailer for the next programme with a breathless and over-excited voice-over in Estuary English. One solution to these interlocking problems is to put a chunk of credits at the beginning. Hence the pre-title sequence: a bit of a story to get us interested and desperate to know what happens next.

I have no serious qualms about pre-title sequences. They've been around a long time and I've written a few half-way decent ones over the years, but always on purpose. This one was retrospective, part of the tiresome process called 'solving it in the edit'.

If I sound a little world-weary about the whole business, let me put it in context. The project took twelve years to get on screen. It started life as a sixty-minute segment for a series initiated by Jack Rosenthal, a series that never happened. I expanded the story and rewrote it as a feature film, at which point Judi and Ian committed themselves to it. We came quite close to making it in this form, but fell at the last fence. Then Working Title heard about it, read it, liked it.

The net result of all this, from the point of view of my desk and my fingers, is that over the twelve-year period I wrote about fourteen versions of the script. According to the computer, I wrote seven drafts for the version we eventually made. During the immediate pre-production period, extensive notes

on the screenplay were arriving from at least three different directions. At script meetings I would say, with all the fervour I could muster: 'Listen. The first draft is always the best, because that's the one you write with maximum passion and curiosity. And David Mamet says so, so it must be true.'

And they would reply: 'We hear what you're saying, Alan . . .' (how I hate that phrase!) '. . . but if you could just look at these few scenes. . . .'

The silly part is, they ignored something that actually mattered. The story is set in London and the Home Counties. I gave very specific stage directions about the geography of the tale. But when the film was completed, the Americans looked at it and said: how will the audience in the States know that this is London? At their behest and, to be fair, at their expense, additional shooting took place, including that shot of Judi getting out of a taxi in Trafalgar Square.

The absolute logic of what we have just seen is that the National Gallery has been converted into a skating rink, but set that aside. The nonsense is that nobody, at any of the interminable script meetings, said: 'Could we have a couple of shots that say this is London to the archetypal farming family in the Mid-West?' That would have been a sensible use of our time.

The heart of the matter is that these endless rewrites did not make the film any better. If some scholar, with more time than sense, were to study all the versions, he or she would, I am sure, reach much the same conclusion. Institutionalized rewriting, in general, is a symptom of fear and a lack of the mutual trust without which, as I keep saying, the business of drama cannot function properly.

In no sense am I disowning the film. On the contrary, I'm proud of what we achieved. The key performances are terrific and the recreations of a wartime dance hall are as good as anything I've seen in any movie. But I also believe there are flaws in the piece that would have been avoided by more trust and less insecurity in the front office.

A footnote to the whole business: I am writing a stage version of *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells* and my first step will be to read all the earlier versions and then burn them.

Pointers for the Future

I should apologize for the unrelenting series of whinges and moans that has informed so much of what I've written so far; but if you invite any professional writer to preach at you, moaning is what you'll get. I believe it was the great V. S. Pritchett who said: writers don't ask for much – most of them would settle for a million pounds a year and the Order of Merit.

By way of compensation I'd like to offer a few thoughts on the future of television drama, thoughts which might, in a good light, be considered constructive. I'll pick up my earlier theme of the facts of life since you're never alone with a motif.

1. Television must dump its obsession with ratings. Early last year there was a hiatus with the ratings technology which means nobody knows how many people watched, for example, *Shackleton*. Therefore, according to what passes for thinking in the industry, nobody will ever know whether it was any good or not.

The key question is whether, in five, ten, fifteen years' time, people will still want to watch it. If the current obsession had been operating thirty years ago, *Monty Python* – to take a random example – would have been dumped after the first series.

2. The industry needs to give serious thought to the apprenticeship writers serve – and by this I mean something more coherent than *Radio Times* competitions and talent initiatives. Over the last fifteen years I've done teaching stints everywhere from Australia to Norway. I hope I might even be invited to Bournemouth soon. A parenthetical word about teaching. I don't believe writing can be taught, but a good teacher can help the writer to learn more quickly. In the words of Mark Twain: I remember everything I ever learned but nothing I was ever taught.

In the course of these adventures, there's nothing more exciting than finding a bright

new original talent; and nothing more depressing than seeing that same talent, a couple of years down the line, flattened out for the purposes of a soap opera or a long-running precinct drama. Can any of us really imagine Dennis Potter, David Mercer, or Alun Owen writing for *EastEnders* or *Brookside*?

But, I hear someone object, didn't Jack Rosenthal write for *Coronation Street*? And didn't you write for *Z Cars*? Yes we did, but in the process we were encouraged to write like ourselves. One of my treasured memories is of going to football matches in Hull during the 1960s and people saying to me: 'I saw your *Z Cars* the other night – I could tell it was one of yours.' Frank Windsor, who starred in *Z Cars* and later in *Softly Softly*, told me once that he could tell who had written each script by the shape of the dialogue on the page.

The decline in true, original drama on television – and by this I don't simply mean the single play or film – is a disgrace, and doubly so because it has been a deliberate policy. One of the beneficiaries has been the theatre. A whole generation of young writers who, a generation ago, would have headed straight for the *Wednesday Play* have chosen to write in the theatre, where you have the liberty of poverty and a tradition of trust. As I speak, I have a play in performance at the Watermill Theatre in Newbury. It's called *Only a Matter of Time*, and it has reached the theatre by way of the radio. Fifteen years ago I would have written it for television.

3. We must learn to use technology rather than be used by it. In the days before computers, I delivered my script – a top copy and two carbons, as laid down in the contract. It was then retyped and duplicated by the broadcasting companies, who had typing pools, a large supply of stencils, and the very latest in duplicating machines. Rewrites were a) time-consuming, b) a nuisance, and above all c) a charge on the company. The invention of the computer enabled them to sack the typing pools and switch the burden to the writer. The prime function of the computer, from the point of view of the broadcasters, is to give them an excuse not to make up their minds – hence the endless rewriting, about which I promise not to say another word, because even I am sick of talking about it.

4. We need to think about the richness and diversity of human relationships. In 1989 I sat in at a talk at the Australian Film School given by a Hollywood script doctor. She started by saying: 'Today we are going to talk about relationships in drama. There are seven.' And she listed them on a blackboard.

I can't remember them all, except they ranged from the sexual to the cosmic. I do remember asking her if you were allowed to have more than one at the same time and she gave me a serious answer. When I got home to our apartment in downtown Sydney, I made a mental list of crucial relationships in my own life. I soon got past seven.

Currently the list includes marital, filial, parental, grandparental, fraternal, sororial, social, economic, political, plus – as a native of Jarrow-on-Tyne, and therefore a de facto Celt – the relationship with that town and its industrial history. I have a daily relationship with the ghosts of my grandparents and their ancestors, with the football teams I've supported, with the books I've read, the paintings I've gazed at, the music I've listened to, the work I do, the dreams I've shared, the dreams I've kept to myself – and so on, literally ad infinitum.

This is important because the majority of television drama seems to me to be dominated by personal and sexual relationships, to the almost total exclusion of anything else. We are presented with a cast of characters who then have sex with each other in various permutations. The soaps, almost by definition, have become dramatized gossip columns, punctuated by spasms of old-style Victorian melodrama. Oddly enough, I am in total sympathy with their predicament. If the system demands half-an-hour of instant drama every day you are bound to reach for instant solutions.

But we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that this is the real thing by specious arguments that if Dickens were alive today, he would be writing for *EastEnders*. He would be part of a team along with George

Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Anthony Trollope, all under orders to remove any individuality from their work.

But the real victims of the situation are the viewers.

5. Let's think a little about the audience. They, at best, are being short-changed, at worst betrayed. My friend Jimmy Perry, co-creator of *Dad's Army*, has a very simple view on this. The network television audience, he claims, is aged fifty and over. In crude terms, the teenagers and twenty-pluses are either surfing the net or out clubbing. If they want to watch television, they rent a video. The thirty-pluses with young families are too knackered once the kids are in bed to care too much one way or another. It's the over-fifties who have time and space to discriminate. That's why *Dad's Army* will always find an audience, however often it's transmitted.

The television executives don't want to believe this and disregard any evidence that supports this view. A couple of years ago I came across some audience research figures that showed the most popular sitcom still in production was Roy Clarke's *Last of the Summer Wine*, which remains one of the most consistently well-written shows in the business. I also learned recently that the most popular daytime sports coverage is indoor bowls.

That is not what the front office want to hear. Nor did they want to hear of the splendid viewing figures or prizes won by *A Rather English Marriage*, Jack Rosenthal's *Eskimo Days*, or, coming closer to home, *The Last of the Blonde Bombshells*, a project which, by the way, was turned down by the ITV Network Centre.

Cutting-Edge – or Bled to Death?

What the television executives want is cutting-edge programming, which presupposes an audience that wants to bleed for fun. There is one producer who is on the record as saying: 'I want a fight or a fuck in the first ten minutes.' There are programme-makers around who, as a matter of deliberate policy, make trashy programmes, distinguished by wall-to-wall buttocks, and justify them by saying, well, of course, they should really be watched ironically, ergo they aren't really trash. Well, I was taught in school that if you have to explain something is ironic, then by definition it isn't.

What we now have in the industry is a centrally controlled culture that Joe Stalin himself would have envied. Any major drama proposal needs ultimate approval from the ITV Network Centre in London, the BBC in London, or Channel 4 in London. We may have a degree of political devolution, notably in Scotland, but culturally our parameters are drawn up in a fashionable West End restaurant and a couple of over-priced wine bars in Soho. The closest that our decision-makers get to the heartbeat of the nation is when they tip a waiter. The audience is something to be analyzed demographically.

Historically, this is a major change from the traditional situation in broadcasting. The BBC long operated on a liberal tradition forged and refined in Oxbridge. The establishment theatre still works this way. It was a tradition with the confidence to operate at arm's length. So it trusted Vivian Daniels in Manchester and David Rose in Birmingham to get on with their work and deliver the goods. ITV, which was made in the image of the BBC, operated in much the same way. For years I worked for Yorkshire Television and for Granada when they had genuine autonomy, with no need to grovel to anyone in London. Northern writers, like their counterparts in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere, were given regular access to the adventure playground, though we were naturally kept well clear of the senior common room.

This changed dramatically under Margaret Thatcher, who hated any kind of liberalism and introduced a set of moral values drawn up and codified in a corner shop in Grantham. And now we have New Labour, whose hidden agenda seems to me very simple. People, according to their analysis, find politics boring. Therefore, let's take the politics out of politics. Obfuscation, obfuscation, obfuscation.

A friend of mine took three young actors to see the revival of Caryl Churchill's play