CREATING COMPELLING CHARACTERS FOR FILM, TV, THEATRE AND RADIO

2ND EDITION

RIB DAVIS

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American Beauty, Alan Ball, Newmarket Press, New York, 1999
The Birthday Party, Harold Pinter, Methuen, first published 1960, this edition 1971
Can't Complain, Rib Davis, BBC Radio play
Games for Actors and Non-Actors Augusto Boal, trans. Adrian Jackson, Routledge, 1992
Secrets and Lies, Mike Leigh, Faber and Faber, 1997
Spend, Spend, Spend, Jack Rosenthal, Penguin, 1978
Talking Heads, Alan Bennett, BBC Books, 1988.
Taxi Driver, Paul Schrader, Faber and Faber, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

When we see a play on stage or television, or watch a film, or listen to a radio play, what is it that we remember most? It may be some stunning landscape photography, or some great dialogue, or a remarkable insight into the meaning of life. In fact, however, all these are linked through character. The insight is invariably reached through the experiences of the characters; dialogue only works if it is absolutely right for a particular character at a particular moment; landscape photography only functions fully within a film if it is saying something about the place and, ultimately, is saying something about what the people undergo in that place. Of course, we might say, 'Great photography, pity about the rest of the film,' but in that case even the photography is only succeeding in a very limited way. It all comes back to people, to characters: all the elements of a play or a film are interlinked, and the most important of those elements is character.

The first requirement of a script is that it must hold the attention of the audience through to the end. An audience that switches off or walks out is not a satisfied audience, and neither writers nor anyone else connected to a production (including funders, of course!) want a dissatisfied audience. So why does an audience stay? The principal, most basic reason is, to find out what happens next. If the audience doesn't care what happens next, then that is a crucial failing. So what makes an audience care what happens next? The answer is, above all: caring about the characters. Caring about what happens next is about caring what happens next *to the characters*. To have the audience care about the characters is, then, absolutely vital; it is central to the success of a script, whether that script is intended for television, film, stage or radio.

Much of what has been said above also applies to short stories and novels, where characterization is equally important. There is one huge difference, though, between the presentation of character in, on the one hand, novels and short stories and, on the other

hand, the script media dealt with in this book (television, stage, film and radio). The difference is that in novels and short stories there is almost always a voice (or, sometimes, voices) speaking directly to us, the reader. This voice, the narrator, may be in the third person or first person; it may be God-like, all-seeing and all-knowing, or it may be limited to one individual's personal experience; it may be reliable, wise and witty, or it may even not be telling the truth. But whatever else it is, a narrator is a *mediator* between the events depicted and the reader. It guides the reader through the events, very often helping us to understand characters along the way. But in the script media (with some exceptions) there is no such guide, no narrator to help us understand the characters and their actions. We see what they do and hear what they say, but the interpretation of character – and of the whole piece – is left to us. How to create strong, credible characters the audience will care about without recourse to a narrator is, then, one of the greatest challenges faced by the scriptwriter/playwright.

This book deals with character in all the script media. These media obviously differ from each other in a variety of respects, yet they have a great deal in common. Radio drama, for example, as it clearly cannot call upon visual effects (other than in the listener's mind), seems a very long way from film, yet in its capacity to move apparently effortlessly from location to location it closely resembles film, while television writing sometimes seems closer to theatre than to film. The relationships between these media, then, are not always obvious, and in the coming chapters there will be many points where distinctions will be drawn between the handling of certain techniques in the various media. They do, however, have a number of major elements in common, including the need for effective dialogue, a strong plot and successful characterization. This last is perhaps the most important of all, for it is upon characterization that all else hinges.

This new edition not only updates many of the examples; it also makes reference to a number of recent trends in the writing of scripts, such as the rise of the multi-stranded script, where no one character is dominant, the increased use of first-person voice-over, and in theatre the increasing popularity of verbatim scripts, which have their own particular effect upon characterization. The book's change of title – from the previous *Developing Characters for Script Writing* – reflects a change of understanding on my part

about the role of character revelation as opposed to character development; more of this later.

Finally, a word of warning about this and every other book which presents itself as a guide to – or, worse, a manual for – some aspect of writing. In general, I have a strong dislike of books about writing that are prescriptive, that tell you what to do and what not to do. And there are plenty of such books around. The problem is that very often the writers of these books have in mind a certain type of film (maybe the traditional Hollywood blockbuster) or a certain type of play (maybe in the naturalistic tradition), and all comments are made in the light of this. Thus one well-known book on screenwriting can blithely state that the goal of the main plot will tend to be action-based while the goal of the sub-plot will tend to be relationship-based. Well, who says? Even restricting ourselves to films, how does this apply to, say, *Citizen Kane*, or *Bonnie and Clyde*, or *Pulp Fiction* or *The Big Lebowski*? I am not entirely unsympathetic to the point: it is true that in many scripts the plot is action-based while the sub-plot is relationship-based, but despite the use of the words 'tend to' the analysis is too bald, the division too sharp, and the analysis fails sufficiently to take into account the multitude of different genres and styles in which scripts can be written. The writers of such books generally love rules (they often show some affection for diagrams, too). I don't. So what I am offering is a little advice, that is all. There are a million ways to go about writing a script or a play, and creating the characters within it. So if ever my advice slips into being prescriptive, I apologize in advance.

But then, writers don't take orders anyway.

PART ONE

Character in the Real World

1

Roots of a character

Scripts are full of characters: where do they all come from? They come from all over the place. There are no absolutes. A character might be closely based upon a particular individual known to the author, or it might (apparently, at least) be conjured out of thin air. Or it might be something between the two. It might even – as in the case with some of the characters in films by the Coen brothers – take as its starting point an actor or actress. (The character of Ed in *Raising Arizona* apparently began with the writer/director brothers wondering what sort of character it would be really fun to see Holly Hunter play.) So there are no hard and fast rules. But there are dangers.

Of family and friends

When I first started writing, I based my characters almost exclusively on family members (disguised, of course, with varying degrees of success). My family is not a particularly extended one, however, so I soon ran out of people. I moved on to friends. There were a few more of them but they, too, were rapidly exhausted. So before long I was genuinely having to create characters.

The reasons for basing my characters upon family and friends, though, were good ones: these were people I knew well. I could hear the inflections of their voices in my head, I had some knowledge of what they wanted to do with their lives, and I thought I had a pretty good idea of how they would react in the situations I was

putting them in. Perhaps most importantly, I knew them in the round: I knew not only their present but much of their past, not only their obvious characteristics but also their contradictions, not only their virtues but also their weaknesses and foibles. And where I wasn't certain about particular aspects I felt that I knew so much else about them that I could convincingly fill in the gaps.

So beginning with family and friends wasn't a bad thing. They came from a world I knew – my own world – and using them as models gave me confidence, an important commodity for any writer. Actually, I felt I couldn't go wrong (even to the point of telling one director, about a character's actions, 'But this is what he actually did!' – as though that somehow guaranteed that its representation on the page was not only accurate but also undeniably appropriate for the script). Of course, I could go wrong, and did. I found myself unwittingly being loyal to the real people acting as models for these characters, on the one hand unwilling to change 'the truth' – of both what these people were like and in many cases even the events that had actually happened to them – and on the other hand reluctant to dwell on their less positive attributes, although these too were 'true'. And I did not want to add or develop attributes which took them further from the originals: these, after all, were my friends! The result was often something close to blandness. By modelling my characters so firmly upon friends and family I had stunted their development, reined in the use of my imagination and constrained what ought to have been a process of organic growth within the script writing, which would have allowed the characters to develop *through the writing*. This is a theme to which I shall return.

Writing yourself

These characters, then, were closely based upon people I knew well, and their experiences were often experiences in which I had in real life been directly involved. Writing about them encouraged a tendency which needed no added encouragement – a tendency to write about myself.

We all write about ourselves, of course. Even when you think you are writing about a character or an event which has absolutely

nothing to do with you personally, you look back some years later and realize – how could you ever have missed it? – that really it was all about the accident you had as a child, or coming to terms with how you had betrayed so-and-so, or dealing with the death of your closest friend. The setting may be remote and the surface details utterly different, but the need to write on this topic, to engineer that situation, to create this character, springs from deep within each of us as writers, whether we are aware of it at the time or not. And that's fine. If we don't write about what is in some way important to us, then we are unlikely to write with much conviction. But this is not to be confused with autobiographical writing, and it was autobiographical writing (masquerading as dramatic fiction, of course) that I was doing.

Basing a character upon oneself has all the advantages of using family or friends as models, but even more of the disadvantages. If we are reluctant to slur a friend (whether or not the friend recognizes that he or she is being portrayed) then how much more reluctant are we to be brutally honest about ourselves? How much less willing are we to develop the character with all its complexities and negative traits?

The fact is that basing a character squarely upon oneself is severely limiting. If we limit ourselves to our own experiences and if we limit a character to what we perceive ourselves to be, then we have put a straightjacket on the creative process. That is not to say that some playwrights/scriptwriters have not created wonderful characters modelled upon themselves (many of Woody Allen's leading male characters, for example, appear to be alarmingly close to Woody Allen himself) but the exercise is certainly constraining.

A reservoir of traits

But if we are not to base characters closely upon friends, family, or self, then how are they to be created at all? The answer is that we can create characters who are not based on any single individuals; rather, we can call upon that massive bank of knowledge and feelings that each of us has from the experience of having come into contact with a vast array of humanity – people we have interacted with in all sorts of ways, as well as people we haven't

even met but have only heard of. All of these people's lives have somehow – directly or indirectly – come into contact with our own. The process of creating characters, then, can be seen as sewing together fragments of individuals from here, there and everywhere – not randomly, of course, but to create human beings who are both credible and right for the particular script. Perhaps more importantly, the characters can be created without our ever consciously identifying particular real people from whom we are drawing traits; rather, the traits can in effect be abstract, though, of course, they then have to be made very much flesh and blood in the form of this or that new fictional individual.

So, we don't have to take whole people or even large chunks of people. Instead, we can create characters by putting together a set of character traits, along with a setting, history, objectives and so on, secure that, when it comes to turning these traits into an active character, we will be able to call upon all our experience of human interaction to make the character live and breathe, though not necessarily resemble any one person we have ever met. It is a leap of faith, and like all such leaps it can be risky, but it can be very rewarding.

So, if we are to start to create a character from ingredients, what are the ingredients? They are in fact the very same ingredients that go to make up the personalities of each of us, the ingredients that make every one of us different from every other one of us. Very broadly speaking, they can be grouped into three categories (though there is huge overlap between the first two):

1. What the character is born as/into
2. What the character acquires or becomes through experience

These two categories very roughly correspond to nature and nurture (what we inherit, and what we acquire as a result of our experiences of life). But then for script writing there is a third category:

3. What the character is now.

This third category is, in a sense, even more important than the other two, as for the most part this is what is most visible to the audience.

For any character that you are creating, the elements of each of these categories can be listed. But a confession: I am not pretending