

INTRODUCTION

This Parallel Worlds project began with parallel interests for me, though these interests existed side by side in different dimensions. At the turn of the century journalism was facing the challenges of the internet and I wanted to find a way to tell from the inside out the true story of the lies told to newspapers, and by newspapers, an ambition accelerated by my leaving a full-time job as Senior Feature Writer on a national Sunday newspaper, while newspapers themselves were on the cusp of the change brought about by the threat of the internet and increasing use of digital technology. At the same time, I was becoming more and more interested in scriptwriting and intrigued by how and why writers chose either the stage or the screen to create and tell a story. This intellectual curiosity increased when I started learning how to work in both forms, when working with playwrights. I began a Master's Degree in Creative Writing at Essex University, then continued with the postgraduate degree which led to my writing *Brief Lies* as both a pilot for a television series, and a play for the stage, with later this analysis of the different forms undertaken as my thesis.

I had been a journalist for 30 years when I started on my Master's, looking for the right way to tell the story of a changing press, how the world of newspapers and print, from local papers to glossy magazines, was changing radically, and fast, with the vast unregulated possibilities of the internet and social networking threatening the established order.

Curiosity about the best mechanism for telling this story and why, was the source of this thesis. I wanted to understand, if there is a difference between writing for the stage and for television or film, how do we define that difference? Not simply for the writer, but for actor, director, adaptor and, most of all, those for whom the story is told, the audience. In the vocabulary of theatre, which language tells the story better - naturalism, realism, or melodrama? Naturalism, introduced to the stage in the last decades of the nineteenth century, "forms the basis for mainstream plays and performances throughout the modern period, and is still the dominant theatrical form

today”.¹ Realism, the dominant style for over a century, holds the view of “the stage as an environment, rather than as acting platform”²; furthermore “people move and talk in a manner similar to that of our everyday behaviour”. (ibid.) Whereas, melodrama is “a work characterized by extravagant theatricality and by the predominance of plot and physical action over characterization.”³ I learned to take a subject, construct a story, create a world, define a message and a way to convey it, but was left with a question: is its most appropriate dramatic medium film, television, stage or, perhaps, site-specific theatre, where the venue shapes the play? For my own play, the setting would need to be a newspaper office.

I felt I had to see and experience different forms of structure in order to understand how best to use them in the telling of my story. The Soho Theatre is an innovative London theatre, full of avant-garde creatives, dramaturges and directors, who are known to encourage new playwrights. Keen to explore forms, as I experimented in one of their workshops, I used a scene from a play I had written about Vincent van Gogh and the prostitute he saw before he was driven in a fit of rage to cut off his own ear with a razor. I set the action not on the stage or in the rehearsal studio, but made it what the director described as “site-specific”, so interaction between the actors took place in corridors, the lift, the basement cloakroom and the street outside. This demands creative energy from the whole company, including writer, actors and an audience free thinking and liberated enough to join the theatre as it danced out into the street.

I was trying out a movement sequence, an event I imagined as a hallucination I thought van Gogh may have experienced while drinking absinthe. The story worked without the audience held captive in a darkened theatre, watching performers on a stage. As Martin Esslin notes in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1991), a writer like Kafka, whose images are dream-like and hallucinatory, was attracted to the theatre so strongly that after he died he even left a fragment of an unfinished play thought by Esslin to be ideal material for the stage as Kafka’s stories are so ‘frequently of

¹ Christopher Innes, *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 1.

² “The Modern Theatre: Realism” < http://homepage.smc.edu/jones_janie/TA%202/8Realism.htm > (accessed 19 April 2017).

³ Merriam Webster, s.v., “Melodrama” < <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/melodrama> > (accessed 19 April 2017).

obsession and nightmares'.⁴ Esslin points out that like Kafka, Dostoevsky, Strindberg and Joyce too, by diving into their subconscious, "discovered the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions." (295) He quotes an essay by Ionesco on Kafka: "The theme of man lost in a labyrinth, without a guiding thread, is basic...." (296). So, it seemed to be the form or vehicle for a story that was important, pertinent, and shapes the story or the dream or the nightmare.

Looking for plays which reflected life in a newspaper, plays presenting that life and those people in different ways using the different forms of theatre available to writers, led me to four different genres of play. It was difficult to find good scripts to reflect a world so multi-faceted that it was hard, if not impossible, to imagine any one ideal form in which to tell a story about a national newspaper. "What is genre?" asks Glen Creeber in the introduction to his book *The Television Genre Book* (1998), explaining "genre simply allows us to organize a great deal of material into smaller categories it enables us to make sense of a large number of choices by separating them into smaller and easily recognizable generic categories".⁵ The theory of genre itself started with the Greeks, who first began defining different artistic categories, believing certain meters and rhythms worked better for certain types of storytelling and writing, as indeed Aristotle defined "comedy", "tragedy", "epic" and "ballad" in *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE). Creeber claims that modern theatre still accepts the ancient Greek theory that the function of tragedy is "to purge the audience of their everyday emotions through a process of 'catharsis'".⁶

For instance, the layered structure of David Hare and Howard Brenton's play *Pravda*⁷ (1985) works well to reveal the power-wielding style of proprietors like Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell who in the Seventies took on the print unions and won – a story presented by Hare and Brenton partly as a satirical comedy. Farce gallops through *The Front Page*⁸ (1928), an homage to slapstick comedy, written by two journalists; far from comedy is the site-specific play *Enquirer*, which involved the

⁴ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (London: Methuen, 1991), 295.

⁵ Glen Creeber, *The Television Genre Book*, (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 1.

⁶ *ibid.*, 1.

⁷ Howard Brenton and David Hare, *Pravda* (London: First performed at the National Theatre, in London, 2 May 1985).

⁸ Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page* (New York City: First performed at Times Square Theatre, August 14, 1928).

audience in a full-on encounter with the Press, using the voice of the Press as it really is, by working with the spoken words of journalists. I will analyse this new kind of theatre, known as Verbatim, in more detail in Chapter Two. My final choice was Sarah Kane's *Blasted*⁹, which falls into the category of an "In Yer Face" tragedy, premiered at the Royal Court in London (1995), using absolute brutality to evoke the audience's disgust at the corruption and total loss of moral compass exhibited by the tabloid journalist Ian who at the end of the play, has his eyeballs eaten by a soldier who has murdered him; this is "catharsis" in primal form, which is in fact a sudden emotional climax.¹⁰ It is hard to classify the genre of this play as either tragedy or comedy, as it has such extreme elements of both. Creeber notes that genre is a way of "classifying different modes of artistic expression", and this is a way of presenting a story which "can actually create meaning for an audience." (ibid.)

In London I saw and admired what, for me, was a completely new kind of theatre, known as Verbatim, a genre which began in the Seventies, using verbatim, words direct from the mouths of real people.¹¹ I found it perhaps the most appropriate form of the plays I saw for its presentation of the press. This Barbican production, first shown in Glasgow and created by author and journalist Andrew O'Hagan in collaboration with former National Theatre of Scotland director John Tiffany and his partner Vicky Featherstone, was about the state of the national press and called *Enquirer*.¹² It was at a crucial time, just before the Leveson Inquiry (2011-2012) highlighted the dubious habits of some newspapers, which were encouraging reporters and feature-writers to hack mobile phones and answering machines. The public was highly aware and critical of methods most of us, writers or readers, knew nothing about. It was a site-specific piece of theatre created from the transcripts of taped interviews with journalists by journalists in response to the perceived demise of the newspaper industry. The performance was designed to reveal the pace of life inside a modern newspaper as it moved into the online world, experimenting with what

⁹ Sarah Kane, *Blasted* (London: First performed at The Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, 12 January 1995).

¹⁰ Glen Creeber, *The Television Genre Book*, (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 1.

¹¹ Derek Paget. "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques." *New Theatre Quarterly* 3, no. 12 (1987): 317-36.

¹² *Enquirer*, The Hub, Pacific Quay Glasgow (26 April – 12 May 2012), *Mother at the Trampery*, Barbican Theatre, 3 - 24 October 2012, *Belfast Festival* (26 October – 4 November).

was still a relatively new genre.¹³ Theatre critic Robin Soans observes:

The term verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on characters of the real individuals whose words are being used.¹⁴

In my play, *Brief Lies*, some lie outright, some struggle to tell the truth, even at the end it may not be the truth. As a writer, I struggled to find the most dramatically satisfying end to the play and with the television script there are six episodes in which to resolve the main storyline, and each week the audience waits to see what the team has to deal with next, the separate and different plots which end in the kind of cliff-hangers Dickens so enjoyed in his serials. The threat of the internet resulted in multiple changes to the practice of journalism in a short space of time – perhaps five or six years saw a total upheaval, with offices moved and redesigned, reporters learning to speak to camera and make little video reports instead of filing copy, job losses which meant loss of security as more and more writers were forced by financial cuts to become freelance and work from home, using social media. There had already been a massive change in the life of newspapers, imagined for the stage by Hare and his collaborator Brenton in *Pravda*. In the Eighties, most of the big media organisations were moved from their 200-year-old home in Fleet Street to the new location of Wapping and the Isle of Dogs, when the print unions famously clashed with powerful tabloid proprietors who broke the unions by moving from Fleet Street, at which point the unions lost their hold. Now, the change is from paper to grey screen, from newsprint to tablet, as the demise of the printed word in books and papers becomes a significant part of the digital revolution.

By 2008, I had left my full-time job at the *Mail on Sunday* and my journalist colleagues with a gaping hole opening up under our feet, created by the breakneck

¹³ Alecky Blythe, *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books, 2008) 79.

¹⁴ Robin Soans, *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 9.

advances of the modern world. Media, from radio and television to film and newspaper, was floundering in cyberspace, fighting for identity and a new form, even those in power – the proprietors, editors, executives – unsure of the changes the threatening internet would surely bring.

This was also the moment at which I first discovered the power of playwriting to transform a complex idea into a simple message. The biggest idea in my world was the change surrounding me. I began to use this new way of writing, so different to journalism which is essentially reporting facts without imagination, to craft a stageplay and screenplay side by side, so the *Brief Lies* project and its exploration of the parallel worlds of screen and stage had begun. I wanted to write what I live and found if I really understood what I was writing about it was easier to bring it to life off the page.

The scripts were clearly based on my own experience of working in a modern newspaper before and during the period the Press began to face, then deal with global digitalization. I saw the ripple on the water coming when I was leaving full time employment at *The Mail on Sunday* to begin a Master's degree in Literature. By 2016, the entire world of the press, newspapers global, national and local, were facing the challenge of how to process digitization, how to adapt to the changes it brought, some of the required change as basic as shifting the layout of offices. At *The Times*, they set up a whole new studio for journalists to speak pieces to camera and create podcasts. At Associated Newspapers (the Mail group of papers) in Kensington, what used to be the tiny backroom online operation became the global money spinner, with Mail Online getting almost 200 million monthly visitors in December 2014, more than any other newspaper in the world.¹⁵

But there was a financial and technological struggle in which thousands of journalists lost their livelihoods and thousands more found their way in, another generation, another culture. My prediction had been realised faster than ever I had imagined possible, and I had to decide whether to write about what it used to be, or what it is now, with citizen journalists, bloggers, Twitter and Instagram, Snapchat and

¹⁵ Abigail Edge "Mail Online almost at 200m monthly visitors in December", Journalism.co.uk, 22 January 2015, < <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/abc-mail-online-on-verge-of-reaching-200-million-monthly-visitors-in-december/s2/a563873> > (accessed 26 May 2017).

iTunes – Facebook is even old hat now and the options change daily as events move like lightning.

When I left the Associated Newspapers to become part-time, so that I could learn more about playwriting, the online operation occupied one small room with perhaps 18 reporters and editors, in a building which held 4,000 people. Now the online operation alone has taken over an entire floor, with tightly jammed desks for 200 journalists, the biggest gold spinning spider in the worldwide web, the leader in what has become a very crowded field.

I first began analyzing the difference in the way a writer approaches a subject when writing for the stage and writing for the screen when I realised each would reflect the world I wrote about differently. The secrets would not be released easily and I would only know how differently and why differently when I had completed both. In Chapter Three I look back over what I have learned from writing the same story, the inner world of a national newspaper, for both mediums: television and the stage, and examine the differences in how to construct acts and shape scenes.

It was an important part of the investigation to know why and how the most successful plays and films were written, made, and received by audiences. I began by looking at as much television as I could because by this time I felt the rapidly improving technology of this medium fits the story of newspapers better: modern, fast-paced, deadline driven, without the time and location constraints of the theatre. I started by writing the arc of what I saw as a six-part television series and then a first episode, avidly watching a new American series called *The Wire* (2002-2010).¹⁶ In Chapter One, I look at this seminal series, the final season of which is almost entirely set in the offices of the celebrated *Baltimore Sun*, and shows how journalists work shoulder to shoulder with the police to follow and hold to account members of the community as diverse as politicians and drug dealers. The series shows how a reporter, or a detective, will track politicians, contact sources, protect the story and the source of it, braving the often mean streets of middle America to report their stories. Beside this revelation of how police and press work together in the United States I will present a

¹⁶ David Simon, creator, *The Wire*, HBO, 2002-2008.

close analysis of a BBC TV series showing the English counterpart, how press and Parliament collide and collude to cover up what turns out to be a shocking murder. This six-part series takes us behind closed doors in the Palace of Westminster and the London offices of *The Herald*, a major national newspaper. Called *State of Play*¹⁷ (2008), the series has a lethal edge, but the pace is slower, more considered, a sometimes sedate but probing British interpretation of how journalism on a national broadsheet works, by comparing the different characteristics of journalists and politicians, showing how love and politics draw them together.

After that I turned to the theatre, to see how modern journalism could be presented on stage. Bearing in mind the old adage “write what you know”, I wanted to draw on the life I knew as a reporter working within a team of people responsible for putting together a national newspaper, which meant remembering the detail, writing it into the script, listening to past conversations in my head, delving into memories which included door-stepping people who did not want to be interviewed; interviewing stars surrounded by press agents who did want to be interviewed, but did not want to say what we wanted them to say; writing stories where the headline had been written before I left the office; inventing personalities for boring celebrities who would probably never have anything interesting to say; and winking out secrets from those who always would. Even at the start of this project all the omens were that in real life we were heading for seismic change, which indicated drama on every level and in every medium. I was acutely aware that all around me people were in a state of suspense, some fearful, some excited, the older hands wary, the young looking already for new ways to report, using new skills, from social networking on mobile telephones to fast-developing new technology.

I saw how there can be a symbiotic relationship between the Press and theatre, one feeding off or supporting the other in helping to create, and sustain, the celebrity culture that celebrates – even worships – fame, and brings in money for not only newspapers but theatres and Hollywood itself. Where the symbiotic relationship has been exploited and revealed on stage – for me the question remains: has the writer chosen the most appropriate way to tell the story?

¹⁷ Paul Abbott, creator, *State of Play*, BBC One, 2008.

In Chapter Two, I will examine four very different plays written over the past 100 years, which present the world of journalism in different lights, productions which start in the early 20th century and take us up until almost the present day. Firstly, I will look at the hit American comedy *The Front Page* (1928)¹⁸, written by two well-known American journalists Charles McArthur and Ben Hecht; then Hare and Brenton's *Pravda*¹⁹ (1985), produced at the National Theatre and directed by his friend Richard Eyre, with Hare choosing his favourite big issue "state of the nation" format to tell a funny story about how national newspapers lost their Fleet Street address and hence their cohesion. Next, I will address the avant-garde genre of site-specific theatre, set very near that old home in Fleet Street, in an abandoned toy factory belonging to the Barbican. The verbatim play *Enquirer* (2012) confronted what seemed to be the death of newspapers and the printed word. Without a script, based on hours of tapes of journalists talking to journalists, it dragged the audience with it from newsroom to Editor's conference as it made audience members see what it is like to have to work daily to Editor's demands, inflexible deadlines, impossible timescales, and clashes of conscience round every corner, down every deadline. Finally, Sarah Kane's *Blasted*²⁰ (1995), a horror story whose protagonist, a deliberately unpleasant and provocative journalist, offers a foul representation of the dark side of tabloid journalism.

"The Editor's decision is final" and "hold the front page" are phrases etched indelibly into the cultural consciousness of the newspaper reading public, but in proper context these are just the daily rules of the game, and I wanted to show how often the game is about lies.

Playwright David Mamet says, "the subject of drama is the Lie."²¹ For him, much of what he calls our "communal life" seems to be a lying contest: the courts, politics, advertising, education, and entertainment. He maintains we lie about whether we lie. (68) I read this long after I had titled my play and my script *Brief Lies*. I know how many lies slip into how many news reports how often in how many newspapers and this is where I got the idea to tell the truth about the lies.

¹⁸ Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Samuel French, 1955).

¹⁹ David Hare, *Pravda*. (London: Methuen Drama, 1985).

²⁰ Kane, Sarah, *Complete Plays: Blasted / Phaedra's Love / Cleansed / Crave / 4.48 Psychosis / Skin*. (London: Methuen Drama, 2001).

²¹ David Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 68.

Different writers choose different methods and, as we have seen, plays take many different dramatic forms, from the classic three-act Aristotelian structure, which dates back to the ancient Greeks, to the provocative late-20th century forms of “Verbatim” and “In Yer Face” theatre, where the drama is aggressively brutal, shocks the audience into a response and, in different ways, reflects realities and perpetuates myths about newspaper life. Themes range through the morally questionable relationship of the Press with members of institutions such as the Police, the judiciary or the medical profession - not to mention drug barons and criminals – to the way some members of the Press, both executive and creative, will use any means to hand to get the story, and editors will exert any pressure they can to keep the machinery of their newspapers turning like clockwork, deadlines met, newspapers printed, delivered and sold.

In my own scripts, I drew on my own experience of people I knew and I wanted to show what really goes on in a newspaper. I have been a journalist on and off for most of my life. I wanted to record and report the changes I had seen as we faced the threat of the internet at the turn of this new century. I felt I could chart this change because I had already been part of that world, part of the change.

When I started as a reporter, Fleet Street was the site and the seat of popular journalism – what *Private Eye* quickly dubbed the “Street of Shame”²², which for me was ironic since I had cut my baby teeth on birthing the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, sending copies to my parents’ friends as I helped put the very first issues together, literally stapling the pages in cartoonist Willie Rushton’s Kensington kitchen. When later I crossed the road from satire to reportage, I found myself in Fleet Street, this famous ancient road which meandered downhill and up into the shadows of St Paul’s Cathedral, and housed almost all the national newspaper groups in Britain. Run almost entirely by men, it was a little fiefdom of its own, marked by long liquid lunches at El Vino, a pub/club where women were not permitted entry – and refreshments throughout the day in all the ancient pubs scattered down the street. I started my career as a writer for *Vogue* and what used to be called “the Underground Press”²³,

²² Peter McKay, *Inside Private Eye* (London: Fourth Estate, 1986), 37.

²³ Abe Peck. *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*. (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

the Australian satirical magazine *Oz*, *Time Out*, the San Francisco based music magazine *Rolling Stone*, and the London feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, but the real work and the real background to *Brief Lies* and *Sharp Newspapers* began when I was hired to write for the *Daily Express* under Lord Beaverbrook's son Sir Max Aitken, president of the Express newspaper group. I worked as a junior feature writer among high powered men, sitting opposite the eccentric cartoonist Osbert Lancaster and watching the rise and rise of the man who was eventually to become the power on the *Daily Mail* throne Sir David English.

Having chosen national newspapers as what Robert McKee calls the "World",²⁴ I started to create my characters for *Brief Lies*. I recognised these people as they emerged from my past and they were rich pickings for telling my tale. Sir David English, for instance, became the model for the proprietor of the fictional *Sharp Newspapers*, Toby Green. To bring in a splash of the nepotism on which journalism, like so many industries, flourishes, but is nonetheless ashamed of, I made Toby the Uncle of my heroine, trainee journalist Daisy. She is the ingénue of the story. Kelvin MacKenzie, once notoriously abrasive Editor at *The Sun*, in life a tough guy from a big East End family, surfaced from my unconscious as the model for the Eye's Editor Jack Harwich; Greg, his Deputy, was modelled on the Deputy Editor of the paper I worked in for 15 years – a man who finally left before being awarded an Editorship, perhaps because he felt his talents were insufficiently respected or rewarded. Harwich had to be the deal maker, there had to be a shadowy politician so Daisy's celebrity slut friend Isabelle, a junkie introduced to crack by an aristocratic boyfriend modelled on one I interviewed many times, has a House of Lords' father who was first an MP, now a power-wielding peer. Isabelle and her father are introduced at different points in the stage play and the screen script. There had to be an online operation or the plot would not work. The inciting incident at the start of the play, for instance, is Daisy getting the online job, working for cool Leo the high-tech office catch.

I wrote the scripts from my heart, and powers of observation honed by years of watching and talking to people from all walks of life. I had created a career for myself, for which I was not trained and, of which I was sometimes not proud, but,

²⁴ Robert McKee, *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 19.

nevertheless, became a career that defined me in the way women used to be defined by their husbands or marriage. I wanted the story to show that to be a journalist needed guts and wits and independent spirit, but not necessarily letters after your name. Learning on the job is the best school for writers. I knew I could have characters who were self-made star journalists because I had seen it happen. What it takes as well as an ability to write is curiosity and a determination to get the story. After working on a Sunday paper for 15 years, the craft of playwriting opened an exciting doorway into what for me was a completely new form of writing, a kind architecture of the written word, a way of sculpting language.

At University, under the guidance of academics who are working playwrights, I absorbed the vital rules of storytelling in a more formalised way, using traditional methods of stagecraft, which now hold me in good stead for whatever kind of storytelling I choose, and once I started visualising for television, I learned about camera angles, points of view, and the power the writer gains from being able to jump from one time zone to another, one location to another, one set of characters to another.

Once I had the “Story” in my mind, and the “World” I wanted to convey, I made the cast list of characters – which were not entirely the same for stage and television, partly because the television version demanded more people – the choice became whether to write first for the stage as I at first envisaged, because I thought once I had the plot, structure and characters for the stage it would be easier to create a structure from which I could borrow for television. In other words, first a play then stretch it out into a filmic version for television, which by 2016, thanks to such ground-breaking series as *The Wire*, was the medium of choice for most up-and-coming writers. In Chapter Three’s reflection, I go back to look at the influences which steered me towards writing for television rather than to focus solely on the stage. I wanted to find a way to, as I had seen it work in *The Wire*²⁵, combine press with politics, and draw the not always obvious link between crime and police, corruption and power. I saw how effective the medium of television could be in conveying the pace and colour of modern life. Reading Brett Martin’s *Difficult Men*²⁶ took me behind the scenes of such

²⁵ David Simon, creator, *The Wire*, HBO, 2002-2008.

²⁶ Brett Martin, *Difficult Men* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014)

powerful stylish programmes as *The Sopranos*²⁷, written by David Chase, *The Wire*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, and *NYPD Blue*²⁸, reminding me how powerful television is in illustrating urban myths and revealing the lives of America's great cities. My goal then was not to uncover the dirty secrets of London's streets, but to present the secrets of men and women whose job it is to report them. I was looking for the difference between how to write about newspapers for the stage and screen, how you write for them both, and how appropriate each one is for the subject.

The stage play came to me first because I am, and always will be, in thrall to the expressive power of theatre, but it soon became obvious television might work better to tell the Story. So, I put that aside and I switched to television after seeing *The Wire*, which I analyse in Chapter One. When I watched the five series of *The Wire* I remember how forcibly it struck me right at the beginning of my epic journey, how apt the fit is between the deadline-ruled life of a reporter and the infinitely flexible medium of television to convey energy, conflict, competition and the pressures of time. The reflective commentary considers the choice I made and why.

Whatever medium a writer chooses it is essential to write on a subject for which you have, if not a passion, a powerful interest and enough experience to understand and observe its inner world, enough to reveal its mechanisms and secrets. Every day in a newspaper produces not just one perfect Plot, but dozens. It was also vital the characters did not become cartoon journalists with rolled up sleeves and fag ends, although it is surprising how many of the men still look like that, sound like that, like *the Chicago Daily News* reporter Ben Hecht whose play *The Front Page* replicated life on the Chicago newspaper, it was essential they were real people talking real feelings. This documentary style works best for reflecting how stories of our world are made and no medium does it better than television because of its speed, flexibility and ability to get into the detail, the very heart of the matter, while drawing back to an overview, a longshot, whenever the story demands it.

The writing has to burst onto the page and grip the audience from start to finish. The characters must believe strongly in something, in a truth they have worked out for

²⁷ Brad Grey, David Chase et al, *The Sopranos*, HBO, 1999-2007.

²⁸ Steven Bochco, David Milch, *NYPD Blue*, ABC, 1993-2005.

themselves – they need to be people who have principles, dreams, ambitions, who reveal who they are when they are placed in a situation which puts those principles, that person, that truth - to the ultimate test. In my story of *Brief Lies* the trainee journalist is forced to make a choice between loyalty to her friend, and loyalty to her paper. This is a familiar dilemma for journalists. People are watching. Are they earning their spurs? Can they do the job? The audience has to feel the tearing apart of the innermost world. The writer has to convey it.

Screenwriter Tony Bicat says that those writing for TV must be always aware they are working for a market-driven, audience-chasing medium that is changing all the time.²⁹ The writer should recognise the enormous volume of work demanded by the medium and how much of it is written at breakneck speed, scripts frequently rewritten on the spot, during filming at the whim of a producer bowing to the latest fashion.³⁰ It is how life works in a newspaper office.

One of the first rules of writing drama, particularly for the screen, is to show not tell, so in order to tell the audience how this world they know nothing about functions, I had to invent or recall characters who would appeal to the viewer, make them watch, involve them. For instance, Dominic West's portrayal of the rough tough detective McNulty in *The Wire* turns him into the hero you want to watch, the one you are rooting for however foul-mouthed and drunken he might be. I had to learn how to show the audience how a group of disparate, adventurous, curious people who happen to be writers, becomes a tight-knit prize-winning investigative team reporting world news – how some people have a nose for investigation, some are fearless, some are too sensitive for the job, some have an instinct for getting people to spill secrets – and how sometimes you just need to have a gut feeling about secrets and where to find them. As a playwright, curiosity and imagination together drive the work, but the cold steel of self-criticism has to be the final tool if you look for objectivity, and to be a journalist you need distance from your subject. As David Mamet warns in *Three Uses of the Knife*, the playwright must never be afraid to cut, cut, cut.³¹ I had to consider

²⁹ Tony Bicat, *Creative TV Writing*, (London: Crowood Press, 2007), 8.

³⁰ *ibid*, 9.

³¹ Arthur Holmberg, *David Mamet and American Macho*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 123.

why I was so sure newspapers would be interesting? Was the world around me really changing as drastically as it felt to me? I did not foresee how seismic the changes would be with the onset of media digitalisation because I did not see it would affect everything from publishing to furniture to finance, movies to music – but then nobody did. I could feel the change coming, I did not know how it would manifest, but I could not think about writing anything else. In the chapters to come I investigate the difference between writing for the stage and writing for the screen based on my own two pieces of creative work, the television script for *Brief Lies* and the stage play also entitled *Brief Lies*.