

## CHAPTER THREE

A reflective commentary on BRIEF LIES for television and stage

When in 2012 in Colchester I began work on my scripts for *Brief Lies*, my story of life in a London newspaper as it faces the onset of the internet, I had just left my job as Senior Feature Writer on the *Mail on Sunday* having been a journalist on and off most of my writing career. I had written two non-fiction books, two documentaries including one shot in Peru, then leaped over the hurdles and learned the tricks of meeting deadlines and communicating with “the desk” when on the staff of a national newspaper, when I learned very quickly that whether or not there was a telephone handy or batteries in your tape recorder the only possible outcome ever was to bring in the story like an eel on the end of a line no matter how muddy the waters. I believed I could chart the change I sensed was about to happen not just in our working lives, but the reading habits of the human race. I was starting this venture with a world and location I know well, I had seen how writers had presented stories to cleverly illustrate the secret life of newspapers and how a newspaper works in programmes like *The Wire*, and plays like David Hare’s *Pravda*. When I began to visualise this story as a television series, I followed script writer Tony Bicat’s admonition to “write in the vernacular you know about the location you know”.<sup>1</sup>

I found this applies not just to screenwriting, but playwriting too, and although writing for television was not my first choice, I quickly decided it was the most suitable. I had no experience though of The Writer’s Room, the collaborative process of writing for the screen where you work as a team, with other minds to work with. I had some experience of the stage. I had spent a year in 1968 with a group called The Living Theatre<sup>2</sup>, a band of actors who had left New York to live and travel across Europe as a commune using the techniques of Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty<sup>3</sup> to provoke their audiences to revolution, then much later I had started to write plays, short plays in particular, while studying for my Master’s Degree. When I completed my Master’s it was the stage, theatre, to which I gravitated. I did not mind the struggle of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Bicat, *Creative TV Writing*, (Marlborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2007), 76.

<sup>2</sup> *The Living Theatre* (New Haven: Yale School of Drama, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), 383.

playwright's lonely room, the blank page or the grey screen – in fact, I rather liked it. I had become used to it when writing books, poems and eventually articles – although while working in a newspaper office, it not so much lonely as full of jangling personalities, domineering characters and the smell of sweat and competition and, then, when I started to write a trilogy of short plays about art and artists and the relationships which make great art, I worked with an actor's group called "Actor in Session". In that memorable moment when an actor was first speaking my words on the stage, my entire story telling process was electrified, the characters jumping to life in front of my eyes like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I understood then the words of playwright Steve Waters when he writes in his book *The Secret Life of Plays* (2010):

In a sense, an unperformed play doesn't in fact exist, or at least remains in a state of latency...The play text on the shelf or in the drawer us as dormant as a seed awaiting contact with the soil in order to erupt into existence; plays likewise carry within them stores of potential energy that combust on contact with an actor and an audience.<sup>4</sup>

However, much as I was excited by theatre and the challenge of making words into dialogue as real as any human's, for the purpose of the story I wanted to tell I was drawn in by the deft storytelling of *The Wire*, and ended with television as my first choice of form in which to tell this tale – albeit the real reason it was demanding was I had so little experience of creative collaboration. But whether writing for stage or screen, the art of characterisation is crucial to get right from the start, and John Yorke, in his book on storytelling *Into the Woods – How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them* (2014) notes that in *The Wire*, one of the characters, Ziggy Sobotka, the damaged and inadequate son of a union activist tries to match up to his father's legendary activism by pretending to be "a major league criminal".<sup>5</sup> But Ziggy is a born loser and it is inevitable the crimes will not succeed. The more inept his criminality, the more he becomes a figure of fun, with mockery directed towards him driving him on to try over and over again to prove himself. It is a classic tale of neurosis compounding the obvious – that the end will not be a happy one. Yorke calls it "an archetypal tale of a character who has to abandon his ego-driven goal for a more satisfying 'need', finds himself unable to do so and is punished."<sup>6</sup> This teaches us about characterisation and how to achieve the believable. Film director Joe Wright, whose first feature film *Pride*

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<sup>4</sup> Steve Waters *The Secret Life of Plays*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> John Yorke, *Into the Woods – How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them* (London: Penguin, 2014), 135.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 135.

*and Prejudice* (2005) won him a BAFTA for Most Promising Newcomer, said recently in a rare radio interview on Radio Four's *Front Row*<sup>7</sup> that theatre "demands the suspension of disbelief" – relating this to his first attempt at directing theatre as this year he directs *Life of Galileo* at the Young Vic.

Having read many scripts, seen many plays, viewed films, soap operas and television dramas during the course of writing this thesis, I have come to the conclusion that the classic three-act rules devised by Aristotle all those centuries ago to work for the stage, still govern most scripts and screenplays too. Many writers and teachers since then have developed the ideas and added their own ingredients to the mix. Story forms need characters whose desires and problems are followed through what Joseph Campbell calls "The Hero's Journey".<sup>8</sup> In his interpretation of Campbell's work, Christopher Vogler's book, *Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (2007), explores "the powerful relationship" between mythology and the telling of modern stories.<sup>9</sup> Put simply this is writing the eternal quest, the legend among legends, which follows the knight in shining armour through the vanquishing of obstacles to climax and final resolution, as, for instance, when St George faced the dragon and won. As part of these twists and turns, we encounter turning points, reversals, crises, climaxes and conclusions which shape and transform as the action continues on stage.

Robert McKee's book *Story* (1997) has a subtitle: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting. He writes that story is about principles, not rules, but it is a fine line – and he goes on to suggest rules, albeit flexible and up to the individual writer to choose to follow, but rules nevertheless and rules a scriptwriter does well to observe.<sup>10</sup> He explains exposition – which is where and when the writer has to learn to "show not tell". He describes it as facts: the information about setting, biography, back stories and even sub-plots the audience needs to know to be able to follow the story, but if it seems like exposition to the audience, then you the writer are not doing it right, the audience will be bored, you are telling them rather than showing them and in many ways I found this the most vital lesson of all – the crux of the difference between writing an article or a piece of fiction and writing a script which

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<sup>7</sup> *Front Row*, Producer Jerome Weatherald, BBC Radio 4, 16 May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces: (Collected Works of Joseph Campbell)* (San Francisco: New World Library, 2008). Introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*. (California: Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, 2007), Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 3.

might have your characters on stage or screen. So, McKee writes about the development of character, and spells out secrets of structure, setting, genre, act and scene design and analysis, crisis, climax straight from Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), and in the end of course, resolution. Reiterating David Mamet's admonition to playwrights to take the knife to words, McKee reminds us that screenwriters are "often mislead into thinking that a screenplay is quicker and easier than a novel, but ...film writers cut and cut again, ruthless in their desire to express the absolute maximum in the fewest possible words".<sup>11</sup> He tells an appealing story of the French author Pascal writing a long letter to a friend then apologising he "did not have time to write a short one".<sup>12</sup> From this I liked, and memorised by heart, the principle of writing that economy is key, brevity takes time, excellence means perseverance. As Confucius was fond of saying: "perseverance furthers". I have found that to be a truth to live by.

I went to lectures by Robert McKee (2011- 2012) and used his book as I would a technical how-to book for my car. So, when I started writing the screenplay I first defined the "World" I wanted to write about, McKee was telling me to draw not just a world I knew, but one other people did not – somewhat exotic and strange – what he called "a cliché-free zone where the ordinary becomes extraordinary".<sup>13</sup> I began to consider what made our offices different, our ways of communicating with one another, our hierarchies – how did they differ from others, how could I make the subtle clear enough to illustrate a quirk of character, a deviation of behaviour particular to the newspaper tribe, such as keeping a bottle of whisky (newsdesk) or champagne (fashion and Diary) under the desk, which only comes out late on Friday night when it is a Sunday paper, or plants on top of computers because writers who spend hours in front of screens believe they give off extra oxygen. Next came a cast list of characters, says McKee: "Deep within these characters and their conflicts we discover our own humanity".<sup>14</sup> In the end, this is what we look for when we go to the movies, turn on the television, dress up and go out to the theatre – an escape from the mundanity of our daily lives, a chance for a moment or so to dip our imaginary toes into another world – be it an underworld or a fantasy world, another galaxy or another culture.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

In the “World” I created for *Brief Lies*, a weekly newspaper I called the *The Sunday Eye*, the central character is a young would-be journalist. These days she would be an intern with the ambition to succeed as a journalist, but willing to work for nothing for the chance to put her First at a middle range University to work for the price of an Oyster card and possibly a free lunch. In the time I am writing about, the early Noughties, the new girl is willing to turn away from the printed word and plunge into the online world first as it is still a way through the door to her chosen profession. There are still people avidly reading newspapers. It will be up to me to begin to introduce obstacles, competitors, possibly a lover or potential lover, and will need to show the idea of a change about to happen, a difference in the way the online operation works as opposed to the traditional methods of reporting and interviewing. There will have to be Turning Points as the characters err, struggle and show their strengths and weaknesses before a final crisis and, then, show how in Act 3 of the three-act structure the crisis is resolved.

In the challenge to show not tell, television is far less forgiving of exposition than theatre - lengthy dialogue between characters explaining who they are, where they come from, how they sit in the office hierarchy is extraneous and slows the action. What is required is a lead character to reveal to the audience what I wanted to show them, how a team of disparate, adventurous, curious people, becomes a tight-knit courageous investigative team, how some people have a nose for investigation, how some are fearless, some too sensitive for the job, some have an instinct for getting people to spill their secrets – how sometimes you need to have a gut feeling about secrets to find them, and what my editor used to call a “nose”.

Who would be the central character and how would he or she enter the world I wanted to write about? If the story was going to be at least in part my own story, the heroine would have to be an unworldly young woman, perhaps in the weeks after a gap year, perhaps just out of University with no previous experience of reporting so the audience would look at newspaper people through fresh eyes, the eyes of a writer who is green as a new shoot – so without consciously planning it I created a character called Daisy Green.

Once I had made the gender decision and called her Daisy I was already part way into the story. I had to feel comfortable enough with Daisy to know what she would feel first, then what she would say. I had already listened to snatched conversations

in the office, on the bus, in the common room, in the café where I had my morning cappuccino, in the canteen where we grabbed sandwiches at lunchtime if we were lucky. I remembered that when viewing a Woody Allen film, you can see when the lead character actually IS Woody Allen, the actor sees the world through Woody's own myopic eyes - this is particularly true in his latest film *Café Society* (2016)<sup>15</sup> when the main male role is played by a young Jewish actor, making his way in Hollywood in the Thirties. For my script I needed to let the lead character be an inquisitive, sensitive, persistent terrier who would not give up on a story, who understood the vital quality needed to be a journalist – persistence.

My lead character Daisy is a young literature graduate, desperate for a job and trying to prove herself to her parents who are exasperated by what they see as her inability to focus enough to stick to anything. She joins a newspaper as an online intern because she knows a bit about writing and a bit about technology, in common with most of her generation. She would do anything to get this job and, as the inciting incident, agrees to work in the online office, although she really want to write for the print paper because she knows the future is digital. She meets the young online Editor Leo, gets the job, and the journey begins.

She gets the job in part because of her connections. She went to a “good” school, has celebrity friends and what the Diary reporters call “a fat address book”. The Editors know this will help her get to a celebrity they are hunting, who Daisy happens to have been at the “good” boarding school with. Catherine, the Diary Editor who covers the social scene, knows Daisy's connections will get her through doors others would be stuck outside. I wanted to bring in the concept of nepotism, which for years has enabled girls to land jobs writing features, or contributing to the Social Diary page. By introducing Daisy as part of the Proprietors' family, I hoped it would prevent Daisy from being a too obvious innocent heroine. She was going to have to manage herself in tough situations with a girl she had a crush on at school, now a fully-fledged crack cocaine addict. The fact she is the niece of the Proprietor Toby Greene would not save her in police station or interview room.

Diary Editor Catherine, on whose desk and under whose aegis Daisy was first destined to be, is a combination of ambitious, sexy, willing to use her wiles to slither

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<sup>15</sup> Woody Allen, Director, *Café Society*, FilmNation Entertainment, 2016.

up the ladder, but tough underneath the silken exterior. She is sleeping with the Deputy Editor Greg who is married (no children). She pulls Daisy in under her wing even though Daisy opts to work for, and fancies, the new young online Editor who is setting himself up against the old guard: the middle-class, middle-aged Editor Jack Harwich and his team of male executives grown fat on their expense account lunches. The competition between the online operation and the features department is apparent from when Daisy meets Leo. Once Daisy gets the job and starts to work it emerges that her old friend Isabelle is now a junky, and has disappeared. The first flashback is in Scene 8, when a reporter overhears two sisters talking about Isabelle in the loo and the fact they have seen on Facebook that she is being held in a police cell, arrested for possession of drugs. We see the reporter listening to the girls in the next door toilet and a famous paparazzi photographer is lurking outside. This is the first Turning Point and it hots up the tension considerably.

As a writer my job was not only to realise the people in this world, but to introduce the tough truths that reporters live and work by, that newspapers are hard on women, Proprietors and Managing Editors seldom allow flexi-hours, that men still rule. The hours are relentlessly long, nothing but the deadline matters because if you do not meet it, the paper cannot be put to bed or shipped out across the country.

I wanted to make the point that even in a literate newspaper or broadsheet as it is known, supposedly targeted at women – with special sections on women's health, fashion and psychology, the Editors who make the final decisions are invariably men, who talk to each other, not to women, about what women want. Most women Editors, or more usually Assistant Editors, view this irony with sardonic humour until they get their fingers caught in the door, shut clumsily by one of their male colleagues, their egos squashed, self-confidence all too easy to shatter. To show this to, not to tell, the audience, I would have to create other characters. To encapsulate the ambitious feminist hiding under the guise of fashionable femininity, I brought in Catherine, and showed her double standards as she nursed Daisy through her first job, but in a sweeping reversal, betrayed her at the last moment, printing the vital piece of information which would cause the death of Daisy's school friend.

To create the backstories, I had drawn up a list of the different members of staff, from Executives through to the writers, photographers and drivers, what they did, how they met, where they overlapped in the story and what part they played in the Plot. I

wrote a card for each, giving them names, ages, habits, style, characteristics, and learned how to create a backstory, an imagined other life – how they dressed, the scent they used and where they found it, where they ate, what kind of friends they had, their working patterns (night owl or early bird, speed freak or alcoholic, yoga bunny or gym addict). I took the people I knew from the office and fleshed them out, wrote down snatches of conversation, phrases and words they used. I realised that those characters which came to life in the script in hand readings around the table or in rehearsal, were based on the people I knew best, so I tried to write in their personalities layered in a way that can only come with understanding who they are as people, then when you put words in their mouths in front of a camera or on the stage they walk, they talk, they come to life.

The goal is how best to reveal the daily reality of working in a team, in an office, for a newspaper, tied into meeting deadlines, fitting in, going out, exploring other people's lives in interview, examining your own and the subject's motives as you write. How would I explain the juggling of this whole new set of realities?

There was no writer's room, no collaboration of talents and ideas. I began to see how necessary another point of view to criticise or support would be.

Structure is crucial and a primary concern. Television scriptwriter Tony Bicat tells us that the basic building block of TV drama tends to be the TV hour which can be anything from 41 minutes to 59 minute.<sup>15</sup> Only the BBC or subscription channels like America's HBO (Home Box Office) have the luxury of the 60-minute hour as there are no breaks for commercials. A serial is a drama told in parts, like *Bleak House*, minutes in the studio, and it gives the viewer a sense of heightened everyday reality – they are comparatively cheap to make, provide top ratings if they are successful and, in practical terms, are probably the most effective kind of UK TV drama, although it would not, I think, work so well to set a soap opera in a newspaper. The dramatic and literary demands are different and complex.

It is difficult to decide whether the storytelling will be episodic, or made as a serial in the way Dickens or Trollope used to write, or presented in six one-hour or half-hour episodes (ITV used 28-minute slots to fit in the advertising breaks, the BBC

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<sup>15</sup> Tony Bicat, *Creative TV Writing*, (Marlborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2007), 16.



prefers hour-long dramas) rather than one great swooping drama. I decided a six-part series might enable me to better express the continual sense of urgency in a newspaper office, the constant umbilical cord between the paper's newsroom and the round-the-clock rolling news. I thought that it would be more exciting to have cliffhangers at the end, so one main story would spin through all six, but each one would also be complete – with the same people involved from week to week. It would enforce a more rigorous structure if I could divide the episodes by each day of the week, starting with a Tuesday because the newspaper was to be a weekly paper, which comes out on a SUNDAY. I started mapping out the plot with a step outline of one episode, connecting scene to scene in a pilot episode then finding the the arc of the whole, including all six episodes. It becomes very clear as you begin to write television how important is the idea of The Writer's Room, where a team of writers sit together to bat ideas about, finish each other's sentence and come up with new characters, new actions, new storylines to make an audience sit up, and at another point, to laugh or cry.

Although I was working alone, and had no-one to play ball with, I hit on the idea of dividing each episode into a day of the week, and the story of that day would be the episode. On each day the camera would follow the activities of a particular desk such as the News Desk, the Picture Desk, or the Editor's office. The week of a Sunday paper starts on Tuesday, Monday is a holiday, the climax is on Sunday - Saturday is the day of obstacles and struggle, before final deadline, the only resolution can come on the day the paper is published, the day the story comes out and the conclusion is reached. The day after that, Monday, is a break – then the whole cycle begins again.

One main story, the one Daisy has to report, will run through each episode until resolved on the day the paper is published, Sunday. The lead story, will change each time. In between showing how this story is handled by the key departments, such as Features, News, Pictures, Fashion, the Diary and the online office. We hear the photographers' banter, the News Editor shouting at reporters, the Diary girls gossiping and, most importantly, we see how each story, and often each writer, is manipulated by their head of department (individual editors), who in turn is run by the Editor himself. We see how the power is wielded behind the scenes by the men, the executives – the Editor, the MP, the power brokers. It is a fine line between character and caricature. But there has to be dark and light for there to be tension. Without tension, there is no drama. This is the dark underbelly. The light comes through the tight-knit teamwork,

the humorous, sometimes passionate relationships - competitive, comradely, duplicitous, self-serving, loyal and occasionally generous, which make up the lives of the network of people thrown together to gather and tell world news to the world. The plot has to show the responsibilities and moral conflicts this can bring, and how each person deals with it. Because I am writing about the massive upheaval the internet brings to the old traditional ways of producing newspapers there is also a need to show up the difference between the old ways and the new (typewriters not computers, telephone boxes – no mobiles, two-hour alcoholic lunches versus today’s sandwich at your desk and a bottle of mineral water). This is easily shown on film, as it is easy to show the tick of the clock to deadline. In the clever American series *24* (2001-2010)<sup>16</sup>, the spy Jack Bauer, played by Kiefer Sutherland, has 24 hours to stop a bomb, save the US President, save his own family, save his own skin. The tension mounts with every tick. Those are the ticks of his world, not ours, not the audience who sits at home eating their supper, no, that is TV time.

It is so vital to keep a grip of the “clock” of the drama. I had to find a way to control what could be, and often is within the normal week of a newspaper, hundreds of different stories taking place at the same time, in real time, as the main story, so using the same mechanism as I used to unroll the first complete episode, fitting each one-hour episode of the six into a day of the working week in a Sunday paper seemed to work.

To keep up the pace over a six-part series, there is a need to establish a brusque sense of the daily routine of the paper against which the rapid changes in each story are played out. In the first episode, I intended to start the action with an inciting incident in a way which shows how the week starts on a newspaper, with a conference in the Editor’s office on Tuesday morning, moving to the News Desk on Wednesday, the Picture Desk on Thursday, the Art Desk on Friday and back to the Editor on Saturday as the hectic pace and rising tension leads to the chaos before the calm when the paper is finally put to bed. Saturday night, a change of cast as the Back Bench lines up with weekend subeditors tucking up the story, sometimes with a nervous writer hovering, sometimes when writers, reporters possibly with their sources and subjects, are downing nightcaps in the pub.

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<sup>16</sup> Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, *24*, Imagine Television, 2001-2010.

I had eventually written ideas for six one-hour episodes, listed, numbered and described so there is a structure to follow, the first episode written out in full, the arc sketched in one-hour long episode, broken down into 28 scenes, moving in and out of real time, from location to location. Description on the page is cut to the bone, directors and cinematographers do not like to be given directions (that is their job), for television never tell (exposition) always show what you are trying to say. The snapshot motto is “zero to hero” as in the hero’s journey or the writer’s journey. Start with the plot, get it right before beginning on the dialogue. Avoid being too verbose. Keep up the pressure on the leads by creating conflict, turning points and climaxes. There should be tension between the characters, and the plot should be unpredictable.

I changed the story, and the characters, several times. At the beginning, because I needed to see how it looked as a whole, I wrote out a scene-by-scene outline of the first episode, linking one scene to another as best I could, shot by shot, so that when a character is moving out of the scene there is a cue to the next action or dialogue. When I thought it was getting too long in sections, the dialogue not terse and realistic enough, I pulled out pages, then got actors to read aloud, so I could hear if the pace changed and the dialogue sounded real. As the story unfolded and I took things out, it became stronger. When I was almost at the end of writing the television scenario, I sent it to a television production company and they told me to keep writing. I was reminded of Ian Fleming’s rule of never looking back when writing. That was when he was living at Goldeneye, his beach house in Jamaica, in deep melancholic depression, doubting the validity of the character he had created of James Bond, the Secret Agent who came to dominate the celluloid world.

The paradox at the heart of television is what Bicat describes as: “It is the most modern and yet also the most conservative medium. Because we allowed it into our homes, it was heavily censored and often timid in its conception.”<sup>17</sup> What this means is because TV is so often in our living rooms, and I include kitchens and bedrooms in this, it literally lives with us as much as being about us.

Like other writers of his calibre, Bicat encourages writers to embrace technology, while at the same time remembering that creativity is in the brain, and can be unlocked

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<sup>17</sup> Tony Bicat, *Creative TV Writing* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2007), 129.

just as easily with a pen or pencil,<sup>18</sup> as with a facility to use blogging to pass on news. He feels certain – was feeling the certainty at least a decade ago, that time-based broadcasts, as we get them from BBC and ITV, will become less and less important – which has proved true. Ofcom claims that the UK is now a “smartphone society”.<sup>19</sup> Social media rather than TV and newspapers is increasingly the most common source of news for the younger generation. Now we have Netflix and streaming and iPlayers to playback what was missed – kids get the news on their mobile phones or iPads, or both – but they do not buy newspapers and they barely watch normal television. Now you can wake up not to your newspaper and toast, but to flick on your telephone and find the BBC News app to see if the world is still standing. In 2007, Bicat predicted people will be able to watch what they want while they are on the move and that is exactly what is happening.<sup>21</sup> The world has become digitalised.

If my story about the time before newspapers collapsed were to be a success, it would be global. It would be sold all over the world to every media or it would not be seen at all. In fact, if I made the films myself and put them on YouTube, more people might see them, but would they remember them? The question brings me to the writing of the stage play of *Brief Lies*.

When I turned to writing *Brief Lies* for the stage I found a uniformity and rigor in the writing which in the more fluid, free and easy style of writing for television had eluded me. Writing *Brief Lies* for television gave me an elasticity of shape and purpose that theatre did not quite do. But by putting a story with its characters on the stage for a three Act journey, or more, the play gains a firm structure, one which as I pointed out in Chapter One, is appealing as a kind of architecture, not just of action, but of language; it also distils the essence of the story, the complex meanings, into simple and strong ideas, making it easier for the audience to be emotionally involved, for their expectations to be met, not disappointed.

If, as a writer, you start to feel nervous about your own abilities and need the guidance of rules to remember and note, there are things that can be done including putting up a sticker on your screen as you sit alone with your imagination. I find one of

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 129

<sup>19</sup> “The UK is now a smartphone society”, Ofcom < <https://goo.gl/TI5jOv> > (accessed 11 April 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Tony Bicat, *Creative TV Writing* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2007), 129.

the best teachers, working playwrights, to turn to is David Edgar. In his book *How Plays Work* (2009), Edgar reminds us of Chekhov's principle, "that if you point the gun to the wall in the first act, the audience expects it to go off in the third".<sup>22</sup> Steve Waters in *The Secret Life of Plays* notes how thin is the literature on the writing of plays compared to poetry or novels<sup>23</sup>, and rightly highlights the fear some writers have that "thinking too much will harm one's gift".<sup>24</sup> It may sound precious and it is fairly clear this is what Waters thinks, but then any gift is precious and should be treated with care and it is true that overthinking and analysing too forensically can block the creative flow and act as a kind of unwanted punctuation. Instinct and intuition, on the other hand, are priceless resources, funds of inspiration; if encouraged, they can be tapped like a stream of consciousness.

Writing about national media, the Press, is a State of the Nation concept, a similar genre to plays like David Hare and Howard Brenton's *Pravda*, set in Fleet Street in the 80's before Murdoch and Maxwell had shifted the axis of media from Fleet Street to Wapping in 1986. The three Act structure, taken from classic Greek theatre, helps the writers manage the layers of the story. Some State of the Nation plays have the traditional three Acts, some like *Pravda* have four, others like Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, about the witch hunting hysteria of Salem, have five, the fourth being set entirely in a court room where 18 out of hundreds of villagers accused of witchcraft were sentenced to death, refusing to admit to a crime they had not committed.

The structure, and the challenge of bringing the story down into one spot, following the Aristotelian three rules of unity – one location, one time, one set of characters<sup>25</sup> - was superficially so different to the television form it was as though I was writing an entirely new story, although the characters, world, location and plot, including the particular vernacular of the newsroom I was weaving through dialogue, were the same.

Working through the story as a play was simpler, but deeper, like a couture version of an elaborate costume, pared down to its essentials, the actions all the more

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<sup>22</sup> David Edgar. *How Plays Work* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Waters *The Secret Life of Plays*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Translated, with an Introduction and Notes by James Hutton, (New York: Norton & Company, 1982). 53.

dramatic because they are tailored. There is less room for dynamic Turning Points and the climax must lead to resolution. I found I had to reconsider the personalities and how they would mesh on stage, their interactions needed to be clearer, in particular where there was conflict, as in Act I, Scene 4, The Deal. The deal is being made between Jack Harwich, the Editor, and Max Broughton, father of the disappearing girl, Harwich has instructed Daisy to interview, and the crime reporters to find. To show the men are equals, and equally power hungry, but with different styles, I put them in a men's club for their meeting, and through dialogue show they share a political aim – both are Right Wing, one a true, blue Tory, Harwich a self-made man with huge free market ambitions in which he is steering the Sharp ship, and not the proprietor Toby Greene. These two make a deal, which is not so much directed by blackmail, as by a desire for political power, although Harwich is not beyond using blackmail and, in the end, he does.

There had to be a way for Harwich to demonstrate his power in the situation. Although, Broughton has it all on the face of it, Harwich turns out to have a secret weapon, a set of photographs Broughton does not know exists – of him and parliamentary colleagues at an orgy, with prostitutes, whips, handcuffs and all, pictures taken years ago by one of the group, members of a highly secretive sex club. Not a piece of information Broughton wants publicised, instead he wants Harwich, through his relationship with Green, to get Sharp Newspapers to back the Tories. If I set the play in 2008, which is the year I stopped working at the *Mail on Sunday* full time, there would be a big election coming up. The power of the Press is invaluable, they both know that. So there is something in it for both, and something dangerous for both. Harwich does not want the paper going down on his watch. He wants the exclusive on Broughton's daughter to increase the paper's circulation and rescue the downward slide. If Broughton does not play ball, he loses.

Still for me there was something missing, some backbone to the story. After writing the entire play, but unable to settle on an ending which would crystallise the moral issues and solutions to the problems they cause for writers, editors, interviewees, and the families involved, I found I had told a story of a celebrity victim, a junky losing her moral compass, but had not really shown how the mechanism of the newspaper works – would Isabelle survive, make some money, kill herself by overdose? Would Daisy be able to save her friend, scoop the paper by releasing her

story online before it came out in print? Would this endear her to Leo and give him and his online operation a leg up?

I made another big change. I thought it needed a narrator to anchor the story and its characters, and also that it needed another tougher language, a change in tone, a voice from the underclass, and although I was not sure who that should be, a narrator might do it. So, a tough, clever, streetwise journalist, a mix between male and female reporters I have known, came to me like a dream in the night, and I created Sharon – the East End hack, who would give the whole script another accent, another flavour, and I hoped, the rudder needed to steer the boat.

In a Turning Point of my own, I was suddenly asked to provide an excerpt from my play to put on the campus stage at the Lakeside Theatre, for Essex Book Day (2013). It made me look at the whole play again, to listen and watch as it got its legs and came to life. This in itself demanded fierce concentration and the courage to make a change to the script that I had not foreseen. But it worked, in part because an excerpt performed on stage brought them to life - made me look at the first scenes I had written with Daisy and her parents again in another light. The moment you see your play as a living breathing entity, you meet your characters, you see who they are, even possibly, where they are going. Daisy, talking to her mother and father about what she wanted to do, even if her mother's brother was a newspaper proprietor, did not make it clear enough what the play was about, nor did it provide the Inciting Incident needed to kick off the Story. There was too much exposition – she was telling the audience not showing. I wanted to write something short, sharp and to the point, so around Sharon the hack I wrote a new Scene 1 which we used for the staged excerpt as a stand-alone monologue, and I had never written a monologue before. It was the first time actors were performing my work on stage to an audience, although we had had several script-in-hand readings which helped enormously, suddenly my monster came to life. The play had legs. It is empowering to see and hear your characters walk and talk, and gave me the confidence to continue.

Setting the first scene of the play in the office makes it immediately obvious this play is about a newspaper. Sharon, big, blustery, slightly drunk, is the news reporter working late, wanting to go home or back to the pub. Under the thumb of the male News editor and other male reporters, she has to shout to make herself heard. She is a reminder of how the Greek chorus of ancient times linked the scenes like a bracelet,

reflecting on what has happened, forecasting the future, grounding the present, tying the scenes like a rope.

When in her first appearance, in Scene 1, Act I, Sharon is asked by the Editor where she is, she says:

Where the fuck I am is sitting at my desk, half cut, smoking when I shouldn't, wishing I was at the pub, trying to meet a deadline on a piece that's got about as much chance of getting into the paper as I have getting into the Royal Ballet.

On reflection, now, knowing what I do about paring down words, I would cut that in half and it would carry the same force. It would be enough to give the flavour of her personality and the nature of her job, which turns out to be an assignment to find the missing socialite Isabelle Broughton. Sharon, and her job assignment, are the Inciting Incident. Together as one entity they kick off the story. By speaking briefly, but direct to the audience, she explains the conflict between the growing online operation, oncoming digitalisation of media, and the warring factions of the old guard and the new within the newspaper's hierarchy. She has also introduced the idea of Daisy the new girl who might have a connection to the missing girl, and, in her end of scene monologue, tells of her adventure in the ladies' room at the Club the night before, when she overhears a conversation between two sisters, the Club dee-jays, about Lady Isabelle being held in a police cell, which they have seen posted on Facebook by a mutual friend.

In the television script, it was easy to introduce a flashback to visualise the scene in the ladies, when the two stoned girlfriends of Lady Isabelle are talking about something they have seen online. On stage, that was more difficult to show. But Sharon's monologue also tells how the Editor had taken the unusual step of bringing a writer, Daisy, into the conference to help her understand what he wanted her to do with Isabelle once they found her, and why. He figured if she had never interviewed anyone before, the more senior journalists, Catherine and Sharon, could hold her hand while she switched on the tape recorder and then later transcribed what had been said.

The introduction to Jack Harwich as Editor was a link into Scene 2, the Editor's chaotic conference, where the furious scene involves all the same characters as in the



television script, and makes it clear the paper will crash if something is not done to turn things round and deal with the internet threat.

In television writing, the three Act structure still adhered to from the classic ideas of ancient Greece, is invisible. There is no interval, no break in scenes – unless it is for commercial television and commercial breaks must be built in, one runs on from another, but under the Story runs a shape and emphasis which works like the Three Act structure. Writing for the stage it is much easier to design the actions to that structure and I found it a help to divide scenes into three phases, to construct the play in three acts.

The first Act has four scenes, the Inciting Incident, as already discussed comes in the middle of Scene 1. Scene 2 sets the scene for the Editor's conference, which happens twice a day every day, and introduces the idea of the newspaper clock, which, in turn, underlines the idea of working to deadline.

The first Turning Point of the first Act has Daisy coming into the conference to be briefed by the Editor, again, unusual for an intern, which emphasises the importance of the story to the Editor, who wants it to be full of sex, scandal and drugs, to lift the circulation and start to deal with his sales problems.

There is another surprising reveal when Daisy points out that the famously wild Marquis of Cranford is a one-time friend, possibly boyfriend, of Lady Isabelle. This establishes Daisy as someone who knows what she is talking about, and Cranford as a possible love interest for Isabelle, or a possible drug connection – even better for the Story. Having heard all the gossip and ticked off his journalists, to their surprise, Jack, who has stopped drinking, heads off for his Club. He is going to meet Isabella's father Lord Broughton to make a deal. Broughton thinks he holds the card as he knows Harwich wants an exclusive story in his missing daughter, but Harwich has something else, he has pictures of Broughton at an orgy with other politicians. This scene, in the gentleman's club, reveals the background manipulation and dark undercurrent between power brokers – politicians and editors in particular, and heightens the tension over how Daisy gets in the story, and how she is reeled in by the men behind the scenes. Throughout the rest of the play Sharon steps in and out to tell the story. It is a device I had never used before, but it worked to illustrate how many different things are going on at the same time in a newspaper.

When I first took the play to the High Tide Festival in Suffolk (2013), as part of a writer's workshop with High Tide director Rob Drummer, now Literary Manager at the Bush Theatre in London, he suggested I try keeping all the action in one office to create an even more intense atmosphere. I attempted to do this, but perhaps affected by the facility to easily move in and out of time and location offered by writing for television, I found it too oppressive, having nowhere to go to was claustrophobic and I felt it worked better to be able to move location at least once or twice to ring the changes.

In Act 2, Sharon connects the Act to the previous one with a brief monologue to the audience, and an introduction to the online office and Leo its editor. The Turning Point here is Leo, who has been asked to move his new intern, Daisy, over to the Features Desk on the main paper. Leo describes Daisy as the "bait", meaning she is the paper's way in to get the interview that none of the other tabloids will get. Leo tells Daisy:

They are at war, your Uncle and Harwich. Jack Harwich is a newspaperman through and through. The very idea of print losing out to digital is such an anathema to him he will go down with the sinking ship!

The implication is that Toby Greene backs the online department, wants to explore the internet and its possibilities, realising that digital is indeed the future, as Daisy does. This already gives Daisy and Leo something more in common than knowing how to use a computer.

In a reversal, the story twists and Catherine makes Daisy swear her loyalty to the paper not the online operation, worried even then Leo might scoop the exclusive Harwich has been bargaining for with Lord Broughton. Catherine takes Daisy under her wing and promises Sharon will go with her to the hotel to guide her through the interview process. In Scene 2, Sharon tells her to "forget who your friends are unless they're useful." By the end of the scene, Sharon has explained how buy-outs work, chequebook journalism, and describes the interaction to Deputy Editor Greg as "bleeding the cub". Isabelle is collected from her overnight cell and taken to a special hotel the newspaper uses to put up the people they want to hide. Daisy has instructions to explain to Isabelle that she will interview her, and that she, Isabelle, must sign a contract.

In this scene, there are several of what Robert McKee in *Story*, calls “magic objects”.<sup>26</sup> He says 75% or more of the writer’s energy goes into designing the story – and that is where the objects come into the scene.<sup>27</sup> There is the contract itself, which allows the paper to print Isabelle’s story and technically allows her what seems to Daisy to be copy approval, but is ambiguously worded in such a way that it in fact means Isabelle can see the copy but not stop it. And then there is Daisy’s tape recorder, which she reveals only at the end of the scene when she pushes it across the table towards Isabelle.

The final scene in Act 2 is the cliffhanger before the climax, the interview itself. What Tony Bicat writing about writing for television calls “the Cliff”, but applies equally to stage scenes as to television.<sup>28</sup> Sharon, as the narrator, says of the girls at the end of the scene: “They have to tie the past to the present and link it to the future”, and adds: “The Editors, they send you in with guns but forget the flak jacket.”

By Scene 2 Act 2, Daisy is making Isabelle sign the contract. By Scene 3, the key scene in which Daisy interviews Isabelle, the girls are into the interview, into their past, and Isabelle has revealed to Daisy something very private, intimate, personal – first her love for Jamie Cranford, who did indeed introduce her to drugs in Chelsea crack dens, and, then, the fact that her father is a bully who drove her mother to suicide. She shows Daisy the suicide letter she found. It says her mother thinks her father was responsible for the death of his own brother. In a sudden and shocking reversal, Daisy pulls out her mobile and photographs the note. It is her moment, when her conscience slips and ambition, laced with the brainwashing from editors, takes over.

Sharon comes back to rescue her. Daisy promises Izzy she will show her the copy before she turns it over to the subs – little realising she will be kept away from the subs for as long as it takes the copy to go through to the printers. Scene 4 shows the process of the late night writing and the deadline. There is a wrangle with Catherine over how and when to show Isabelle the copy. Sharon will not let Daisy go to Isabelle. Catherine and Sharon gang up on Daisy, make her feel first foolish and naïve, then

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<sup>26</sup> Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. (London: Harper Collins, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Tony Bicat, *Creative TV Writing*, (Marlborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2007), 129.

brilliant as the spread gets laid out and she gets a picture by-line. The Scene ends with Daisy unable to find Isabelle. The Act ends with Harwich having to threaten Broughton with the photographs of the orgy, and sending them to another newspaper, while the News Desk breaks the news to Daisy that Isabelle has taken an overdose. As a final twist, Leo has scooped the newspaper by posting the story online which was promised to the paper and designed to be exclusive to the newsprint edition. This could be the climax and the resolution. I struggled with where to end it. I know plays do not have to end with a huge fanfare, or a neat moral answer. In fact, it is more thoughtful if they do not, if they leave the audience not just wanting more, but reflective, considering what outcome makes sense. But I did not want to leave loose ends.

The final scene in the *Brief Lies* play sees Leo taking Daisy in to the Editor's office for what he calls a "roasting", and Sharon casting doubt on whether indeed Harwich will be Editor for long once it is known about his dealings with Broughton and his role in Daisy's broken promise to Broughton's tragic daughter. In this case, the audience is left considering what the Editor will do to Leo's career and Daisy's hopes, whether he, too, will come a cropper and lose his job; whether he will lose his job and Leo be promoted by Toby, who wants the online office to succeed in the brave new world. Finding a way to complete the story was in many ways the most difficult part. Although I did not start with the final paragraph, on reflection I agree with Bicat that "the best way is to start at the end and work back".<sup>29</sup>

Analysing the power of the stage play in relation to the story of newspapers, their past, and what will happen to them in the future, I think the intensity of the one-to-one exchange between actors and its effect on the audience is more moving than visual jumps from location to location and weaving through time. As a writer, I found it more challenging and invigorating, as though these human beings I was envisaging were both under a microscope and magnified by a telescope at the same time. *Brief Lies* is a contemporary morality tale, which may ring a bell with people trying to report the tragedies of the global world and move into another dimension, where cyber wars will take place in cyberspace, and Daisy's dilemmas are both universal and individual. The issues of conscience, and principles over ambition, are being struggled with every day in print and broadcast, film and television, radio and books.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 129.

To my mind, theatre is the teacher. If you have understood how theatre works you can tell a story on any stage, and will be able to move seamlessly into film. Aristotle pointed out that epic poetry was a fine preparation for writing plays<sup>30</sup> and urges writers of plays to create not just a simple plot, but a complex one.

Steve Waters talks about how there are “phases to the act of playwriting. That the muse if she exists, governs the dangerous...”<sup>31</sup> That is true, and exciting and without danger there is no passion and vice versa. The muse, through governing passion demands courage and if the writer can find courage, it will improve the writing. I found that the play almost wrote itself once I had taken the plunge, followed my instinct and started to use Sharon as a narrator – something I had never before tried. As Waters writes in his book: “plays do have a life of their own, as the writer you have to listen, feel and begin to write.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Translated, with an Introduction and Notes by James Hutton, (New York: Norton & Company, 1982). 50.

<sup>31</sup> Steve Waters. *The Secret Life of Plays*. (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), 7.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*