

CONCLUSION

There is much to look back on and learn from the experience of doing this analysis. It helped me see the philosophical and moral dilemmas faced by journalists more clearly than when facing them myself. The power of hindsight clarified the demands of the story and how to write it as a playwright not simply report it as a journalist. There is now, for me personally, the joy of having completed a full length stage play, which I know will need the support of many other collaborators to bring to life, but it could happen, and it could amuse and entertain people and possibly lead me down a new path as a writer. The idea of writing about life in a newspaper as a script for television has been looked at and approved once, in 2013. It was sent to an independent production company looking for just such a story, they were interested in seeing more but the script was not finished or ready. By making myself improve my technique by putting into practice the advice I have been writing about from the professional writers I have been reading, there is potential for this as a piece of work for television too.

In this thesis there is discussion of how and why a play is designed and structured, with a view to assessing the difference between television and theatre for writing drama, discovering the most appropriate format and medium for each story. In this case the thesis has at its core not simply the question of how to define the differences between writing for the stage and the screen, but how best to write about newspapers on the stage and the screen, how to convey the message, the medium, the people and the inner workings of newsprint papers, a form of news gathering which has functioned for over three centuries in this country, starting with The London Gazette in 1665, but is now dying in front of our eyes. Their story cannot be written without bringing in the effect of digitalisation on the media and the advent of the internet on all our lives. The unregulated challenge and infinite potential of cyberspace has made presenting the truth, the facts, more difficult to define and to evidence, which in turn has led to the on-going argument over what is "truth" - what it is, what it means, who decides, on what evidence? If you are daring to write a play or screenplay about telling the truth in a world where the President of the United States introduces the idea of 'post truth' or 'alternative facts' while accusing his own country's media of

obfuscation, then the picking apart of what constitutes truth, or post truth, or alternative facts, becomes an essential part of the story of newspapers in our time and the future. The problems with citizen journalism and the platforms of Facebook and social networking as a means of conveying truthful news is that there is still no rigour, no need for proper evidence, the users are simply fed the news they want to read or hear which raises enormous and hitherto unforeseen problems. Another story of truth and lies completely.

I found there to be a curious similarity between the experience of going to the theatre and reading a newspaper. Whereas the physical entity of iPads and small screens are colder and harder than paper, they are still a more detached medium in which to tell or receive a story, as they separate the viewer from it and demand more obvious and bolder imagery. There is a texture in theatre which is like holding a newspaper in your hands – you can feel it.

In this analysis I have looked at plays and British and American television television dramas. In chapter One, I analysed the American series *The Wire* and the BBC1 television drama about newspapers *State of Play*. When looking at writing for theatre, in Chapter Two, I examined the early American play *The Front Page*, which was later made into a successful film; David Hare's *Pravda*, Andrew O'Hagan, John Tiffany and Vicky Featherstone's Blythe's verbatim play *Enquirer* and Sarah Kane's shock-filled and brutal challenge to the tabloid press *Blasted*. I was drawn to the accessibility of television, its speed and adaptability. The long-running American series *The Wire* changed the way I looked at television completely and, in turn, changed the way I wrote; made me listen more carefully to dialogue, both on television and the world around me. It also made me more aware of how our environment conditions our lives as I watched the, to me unknown, city of Baltimore, its citizens, its press and their stories. The fact is that today all writing is influenced by the way we use social media, young people who use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat daily are telling their stories in a less formalised, more spontaneous way than their parents' generation did, and this generation is the future. These social network platforms also give rise to the complicated issue of whether or not newspapers were telling the truth in the time I set my scripts – pre-Leveson Inquiry. We now live in the 'post-truth' age, partly brought about by the existence of those platforms and their

willingness to forsake forensic investigation for an easy read. As Apple CEO Tim Cook says, “unfortunately some of the people that are winning are the people that spend their time trying to get the most clicks, not tell the most truth.”¹

At the start of this journey, while I was still working full time as Senior Feature Writer for a newspaper at the beginning of 2008, I was appalled, and many journalists were frightened, by what they saw as a cyber take-over from outer space, or a digital revolution. This interested me as a story, but I can see now the printed word may be challenged, may have to change, along with theatre and television, but it could be for the better. It could be moving and exciting and the challenge might produce better and more innovative, modern avant-garde work in both forms: the small screen and the stage, and that is to be welcomed.

I am a writer, and language has become so deeply ingrained in me, since first burying my head in books, that I gravitated to the theatre’s literary power. I fell in love with Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams, looking for a narrative voice of my own which I had not found in writing non-fiction books or journalism. I am still searching, nonetheless, I will not abandon my life in journalism and will always be drawn to recording and archiving what I see as true stories, following what Mahatma Gandhi called “the selfless search for truth”, which is promise I made to myself when I became a journalist. I wanted to, in *Brief Lies*, recall and record how I was trained to become a member of the press.

My interest in comparing the difference between writing for the stage and the screen began while I was studying for a Master’s, which in turn led me to playwriting myself, as a kind of architecture for words, having written books and articles and made documentaries, the mystery of fiction began to beckon. Playwright Steve Waters writes about journalism and about playwriting, saying: “The playwright as sociologist is frequently suspicious of the playwright as journalist...the playwright might write more immediately for the next day, but the playwright too is inextricably linked to their

¹ Matthew D’Ancona, *Post Truth* (London: Ebury Press, 2017), 119.

moment.”² Wearing both hats, knowing both forms, living both lives, I find a fierce delight in approaching playwriting from both vantage points.

The complex, lengthy, layered scripts of most of David Hare’s stageplays demand the attention of their audience and provoke thought. They also illustrate how much there is to learn about stagecraft; how many different types of theatre there are from naturalism through to high melodrama, realism to surrealism, and how many different genres. Television because it is usually in your living room is more accessible – you do not have to get dressed up and go somewhere as you do to the theatre. It is also more immediate and that immediacy makes it attractive in the speedy world we live in, habituated as we are to rapid change and rapid movement, which explains the appeal of long running soap operas like *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*, stories which people can relate to in their everyday life.

I came to the conclusion that people go to the theatre for more than just the play, and seek more than entertainment from the art form they are go to experience. There is the social interchange and the intimacy of sitting close to strangers in the darkness. There is a similarity with the ritual of church, where there is a ceremony going on in front of you in what can be seen as a sacred space and that ceremony has the power to draw you in and transform you, what Peter Brook calls “Holy Theatre”.³ The audience walks through the door of the theatre for excitement, yes, but also for insight, a cultural jolt, a challenge to intellectual presumptions, an arena for debate and provocation, a magic you can reach out and touch, a human drama where actors are right there in front of you and their words and deeds may ring in your ear forever. In *The Secret Life of Plays*, the playwright Steve Waters writes about the “mystery” of playwriting. I find the words enchantment and magic and thrall come to me when describing the effect of theatre. Waters writes: “Perhaps that mystery is the only thing that can finally be asserted with any confidence about how plays live.”⁴

That does not mean I think any less of writing for television or for the big screen, for film, but as a writer theatre is the challenge I feel has taught me most about writing,

² Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), 190.

³ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 47.

⁴ Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), 202.

and I feel moved to respond to, although a good screenwriter will always benefit from understanding the nuances and structure of theatre and writing for the stage.

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