

## Golden days out

Alan Bennett, master of television drama, recalls gentler days at the BBC, when it was a haven for eccentrics and a playground for emerging talent

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Revisiting my plays 20 to 30 years after they were written, ought, I would have thought, to provide insights into the time when I was putting them together and into the person I was at that time.

I'm not sure they do. To younger readers they may seem old-fashioned and even antique, but they always were even at the time of writing. Writing and recollection are inextricable and I never felt that I was chronicling my own times, simply because so much of the dialogue came out of my remembrance of childhood.

The places were from childhood, too - Leeds and its back streets, where I was brought up, Morecambe where we used to go on holiday, locations that were even then disappearing as we filmed. In Leeds particularly this was the case, on two occasions demolition crews working in the next street to where we were shooting. This at least was contemporary, the wrecking of England's provincial cities and the break-up of their social structure the background to many of these plays.

In 1971 I had written two plays, *Forty Years On* and *Getting On*, but had no notion of how to write a TV play, still less a TV film, the actual word "film" still trailing enough glamour to make me feel slightly intimidated. I began to jot down scraps of northern dialogue with no notion of the characters into whose mouths they might go and with no notion of a plot, either, though I knew I wanted it to have a pre-first world war setting.

These jottings eventually turned into *A Day Out* (1971), a road movie of sorts, only the road was a succession of back lanes and even cart tracks that takes an Edwardian cycling club from Halifax to Fountains Abbey. Pathetically literal-minded, I remember worrying that this was a little far for a group to cycle on the machines of the time and whether the BBC script department would on that score alone find it implausible. They did find it implausible, though not because the cyclists had too far to go but because, in the script editor's view, the play didn't go far enough; didn't go anywhere, in fact. At this point a rather military-looking producer at White City got hold of it, and dismissed these objections by saying: "Well, it goes to Fountains Abbey and back which is quite far enough for me," and briskly put it into production.

This was Innes Lloyd, who produced everything I wrote for the BBC over the next 20 years. Without him many of my plays would not have got to the screen and our collaboration, always happy and fruitful, was the best and the longest working relationship I've had in my life. My other collaborator was the director, Stephen Frears. To both of them I owe an immeasurable amount.

BBC television in the early 70s was only distantly related to what it has since become, with the atmosphere then discernibly derived from what had prevailed on BBC radio. From its inception radio had proved a haven for the odd and the eccentric, a ramshackle set-up that found room for the flotsam of the literary world - stalled writers, indolent poets, the seemingly unemployable and downright drunk. To such as these the BBC was

above all a patron, easy-going, generous and not too demanding. But that the 40s and 50s should also have been the golden age of radio says something about the nature of patronage, with waste (or at any rate slack) an essential component.

Some of this easy-going but richly productive atmosphere carried over into television in its early days, with certain programmes outstanding in nurturing talent: Tonight, the early-evening magazine programme, and Monitor, the arts programme, were both umbrellas under which many young film-makers learned their trade.

The atmosphere was notably relaxed and for me, as for many of my contemporaries, television began as a kind of playground or a school where you learned as you went along, making your mistakes on the blackboard with the nation the class. I served an apprenticeship in two of Ned Sherrin's late-night shows, Not So Much a Programme and The Late Show, successors to That Was the Week That Was, writing and performing in sketches live every Saturday night.

In terms of quality of output, which was often outstanding, this unfrenzied approach was not a wasteful way of working. But it was unpredictable, and not easy to control or to quantify, so when in the 70s the BBC began getting in management consultants and embarked on a series of reorganisations, what had always been the traditional BBC approach both in radio and TV was an early casualty. If I regret the supposedly streamlined organisation that eventually emerged, this is not just nostalgia, but an almost ecological regret for the loss of a habitat - the wetlands of the mind, perhaps, the draining of a friendly fen that had long sheltered several struggling or endangered species.

One such was a type of tough, often gruff middle-aged woman, single very often, though not always, who was the prop and stay of whatever department she was assigned to. She would know the BBC inside out and be versed in all its administrative short cuts. Unabashed by money, rank or celebrity, such women ruled the roost in their departments much as senior civil servants did in Whitehall. It's a well-known story, but it was one such who was manning the desk at TV centre when the King of Norway arrived to visit the director of programmes.

She called the office in question, then turned back to the distinguished visitor. "I'm sorry. Did you say the King of Norway or the King of Sweden?"

Happily, such women (and they were always women) made the jump from radio to television, and were quick to master "crossing the line" and the mysteries of continuity - knowing how many bites had been taken out of a sandwich at the cut, how far down the cigarette had been smoked and all the petty but essential expertise of film-making. Tireless, loyal and unsung, with names like Kay, Thelma and Joan, they lived for the Corporation and, versed in its logic and lore, took many a now-famous director through his first shooting script and pointed him towards Hollywood.

Smokers all, and fond of a snifter in the BBC club, there aren't many of them left, their few successors catching their deaths in draughty doorways at the back of the building, still pulling on a guilty fag. Once, though, they were the backbone of the BBC, and I am happy to have seen them in their pride.

Another difference between productions then and now was that there was never a long-drawn-out process haggling about money, such as generally has to be gone through

today. It's true that, being a model producer, Innes Lloyd shielded me from any such concerns, and it is also true that being a much-trusted figure in the BBC his approval carried weight and was often recommendation enough.

At this time in the early 70s single plays were accepted as part of the BBC's remit; they were seldom commercial nor, in the days before co-productions with transatlantic companies, could they be expected to make their money back. But even the most modest plays were part of a tradition of BBC drama, inherited from the radio, which with two or three plays a week had built up a regular and informed audience. The play was still the thing.

That is, of course, no longer the case. Single plays are made into events; there's no sense of them being part of a repertory or of any tradition at all. An audience that was sophisticated and educated to the drama has been prodigally abandoned. I just count myself lucky that in 1971 I managed to catch the wave.

I used to attend all the rehearsals of my plays and go on location with the films. I am more gregarious than I like to think, and I found filming an enjoyable process. It got one out of the house and away from the type writer. To be filming in a strange place with a group of congenial people seemed to me then the best sort of holiday.

Inevitably, though, the more I did the more an element of the chore came into it. But so it is with most things. Sooner or later in life everything turns into work, including work.

I learned lessons, some of them quite basic. If I had a function it was as unofficial dialogue coach, particularly on the northern pieces. I learned the hard way that though it's possible to give an actor the pronunciation of a word, it's unwise to tamper with its emphasis.

In *A Day Out* (1972), Baldring (played by Paul Shane) gets off his bike after a long ride and remarks: "My bum's numb," the emphasis rightly falling on "numb". Paul, however, put it on "bum", with the implication that while his bum might be numb, the rest of him remained vibrantly alive. I queried this emphasis and he made valiant but unsuccessful attempts to correct it. Subsequent experience has shown me that the more a phrase is repeated, the less meaning it has, and the harder it is to get right. At such times the writer's function is not all that different from that of, say, the props man or the make-up girl, who dash on to the set just before a take to tweak a doily into position or powder a nose. And it was at moments like this, getting an actor to repeat "My bum's numb" for the 17th time, that I began to wonder if this was a proper profession for an adult person.

À propos dialogue, I notice that in *A Day Out*, which was my first attempt to write in a northern idiom, I also tried to transcribe how it should be spoken. This sometimes makes the speaker seem gormless, and the more of this kind of dialogue I wrote the less I concerned myself about pronunciation and left it to the actor. Later I was happy to find my instinct confirmed by Thomas Hardy:

"An author may be said fairly to convey the spirit of intelligent peasant talk if he retains the idiom, compass and characteristic expressions, although he may not encumber the page with obsolete pronunciations of the purely English words and with mispronunciations of those derived from Latin and Greek. In the printing of standard speech hardly any phonetic principle at all is observed; and if a writer attempts to exhibit

on paper the precise accents of a rustic speaker he disturbs the proper balance of a true representation by unduly insisting upon the grotesque element; this directing attention to a point of inferior interest; and diverting it from the speaker's meaning, which is by far the chief concern where the aim is to depict the men and their natures rather than their dialect form."

Sunset Across the Bay (1974) was my second television play. It's about a couple living in Leeds whose dream has always been to retire to Morecambe. When they do, they find they are lonely and unhappy, and the husband ends up having a fatal heart attack, leaving his wife to face the future alone in this place of their dreams. In some ways the couple are not unlike my parents, except the wife is more querulous than my mother and the husband less gentle than my father. But much of their language is the same and their attitudes: Mr Palmer gets up at six o'clock and paces the promenade, just as my father did when we were on holiday in Morecambe, and Mrs Palmer is every bit as cautious in company as my mother.

I had to consider these similarities when I was writing it because my parents had not long retired, not actually to Morecambe but to a village in Craven which was not all that far away, and they were often there. Unlike the couple, though, their retirement was very happy, if marred by illness, and in 1974, when I had written the play but it had not yet been filmed, my father had a heart attack and died, leaving my mother in much the same position as the widow in the film.

Anyone who writes will be familiar with the feeling of involuntary prediction it sometimes involves, so having written my father's death I felt I had helped to occasion it. My mother never felt this or saw either of them in the characters I had created. "They're from Leeds," she said, "and we're from Leeds, but that's as far as it went. Mind you, it was grand seeing Morecambe."

Things could always go wrong, though, and I can never watch a tape of Me, I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1978) without cringing at its final minute. It's not at all plain where the action is going (and wasn't plain to me when I was writing it) but five minutes from the end (when Hopkins gets it together with his student, Skinner) it turns into a love story. As they both grin cheekily there is a wonderful swelling (on the sound track, at least) and in comes South Pacific and "I'm as corny as Kansas in August," climaxing with "I have found me a wonderful guy". Back in 1978 this was rather bold, except that in transmission the sound was (as I've always thought deliberately) faded down at this point for one of those needless announcements (since discontinued) saying, "Hugh Lloyd is currently appearing in Run for Your Life at the Vaudeville theatre." So no danger there, and the nation's moral sensibilities remained unassaulted.

It wouldn't happen now, of course, and maybe in its small way the play and others like it (though more explicit) are part of the reason why.