

AA I have been writing for about 15 years, and I have written for the Royal Court, the RSC, Hampstead Theatre, the usual kind of new writing venues. I have just written a play that is in rehearsal at the moment that is opening in the Lyttelton on the 7th of December. So that is a project that I am actually working on at the moment.

EW you are rehearsing this week, aren't you?

AA rehearsing this week, yes, here in the studio. It is a play about – it is a play that goes on w a classic play, *She Stoops To Conquer*. And I have written a contemporary play to go with that play. It is for a director called Max Stafford Clark who has often put a contemporary play and a classic play together and then runs them in repertoire. So that is what I have been up to.

EW because I know you – you are very much my mate April, and we met about 10 years ago on an opera course. I realised that we talk about our work, but in between talking about things like sex and clothes. There are so many things that actually I have wanted to ask you, for so long, but I never have. For example, where do you work at home? Are you a tidy person? Those are the two things I have always wanted to ask you.

AA I actually now have an office at home where I work. I do kind of get up in the morning, sit down at my desk and work. One of the things, I am sure it is the same with writing – I don't know if it is the same as writing music, actually. But it is not just about putting words on a page. There is a whole process, a thought process, and a process of kind of gathering ideas and materials that doesn't actually look like you are working. It always makes you feel really guilty if you are just sitting down, and everyone else is going off to work. You sort of feel that you are not doing anything, but actually that process is – you can't – I mean I have in the past sat, and just tried to write, and thought that that was writing. But you just end up with a hundred pages of nonsense which you then have to throw away at the end because it is not properly conceived.

EW so do you sit at your table and think? Is that what you do?

AA or is just lie on my bed. I do a lot of research – reading. That is often how – I mean, the play I have just done, I had to read so much – I took the commission, it was about the 18th century, I thought that will be fine, the 18th century can't be that different, and it turned out it was just so extraordinarily far in terms of thinking. There were huge characters, like Dr Johnson, who has ended up being in the play, who I realised you can't write badly for, because it is just going to really – he



was the wittiest man who has ever lived. And I just thought I have really shot myself in the foot now, having to write him words for him to say. I would read them back at the end of the day and think, no, no. You have to just build up almost an alternative memory for yourself that you can draw on. Lots of research. That can take a long time. For this play, it has taken three years from the very beginning of agreeing to it being in rehearsal, and I never would have thought – I would be horrified if you told me it was going to take three years – a huge commitment to a project –

EW you have also written a couple of libretti for Jonathan Dove, composer. How does that compare to writing plays?

AA it is different because you have to work with somebody. With Jonathan, we wrote the opera, *Flight*, together. I remember, a couple of months in, thinking, I don't like this idea any more, I'll just phone up Jonathan. Jonathan said, no, we can't change now. I thought, oh my god, I have committed myself now, it is not the same as writing a play, because I can suddenly think, I don't want to do this anymore, because you have someone else, and someone else's deadlines. He has to have the libretto a year before for then to write the music, obviously. So that was a difference, you are not in control in the same way.

EW I remember you were working on that opera and you said, this is going to be bollocks because I have gone off the story, that was awful. You had actually wanted to work on

something else, and then it turned out that the thing you wanted to work on was the thing I have been dying to work on myself, so now we have Jonathan's dregs.

AA Yes, so that is true, we have Jonathan's dregs. That is quite good. You can get an idea and save it for later. But you definitely – I felt – I thought, I hope I can do this, because it is Jonathan's life, it is not just my life –

EW because that opera turned out to be a real turning point for that composer. It went on at Glyndebourne, I was with you for the premiere, I remember speaking to you and saying, that the libretto, the words that singers sing, often that looks like nothing, it often doesn't even look like a play because we composers we need as few words as possible. It can look really bald, but knowing that Jonathan is going to make this whole world, and actually he did.

AA yes, he did. it is strange when you read back a libretto, because it is so condensed. It feels like a very different bit of writing than look at text of a play. It is very sparse, a libretto.

EW do you mind that when words are sung, people can't hear them?

AA no, but the thing is, I don't really think that I understood that people – they are not really going to be able to hear much, everything of the libretto. Somehow you needed to hear things to understand the story. I remember sitting at Glyndebourne, there was a big man behind me saying, I don't understand what is going on at all. I remember thinking, oh my god. So I think I would know that next time, it is much more about emotion isn't it. Little jokes don't – people spoke, shouted the jokes in that, so that people could get them.

EW your process of rehearsal is very different to mine. When you go into rehearsal you do lots of rewrites.

AA do you not do that? I suppose you can't because you would have to change the scores.

EW that is one of the bad things about opera I think. You work on the music and then once you see it in the dramatic situation, obviously some things are wrong. For instance, it takes somebody longer to walk from there to there, so you will need more music. You tend to just stay with it, you have to make it work. But with you, once you are in rehearsal, you can tweak things.

AA that's right. We do loads of cutting and – but what's tended to happen in the Garrick play, *A Laughing Matter*, its very long, its the longest play I have ever written, its about two and a half hours, and the director keeps saying, its too

long, we're going to have to cut it. So we panicked and we cut it. And now we are back in rehearsals and he is saying, I think we'll just put this back in, so things are kind of creeping. It is very much about finding out what works, with the actors, on the stage.

EW when things are cut, do you ever fight that?

AA I honestly like it when things are cut because the worst thing in the world is when you are sitting in a play, you are sitting in your play and people are going – that horrible feeling, an audience starts shifting around particularly when they are bored. You have to keep the momentum going, the pace. So cutting often is about making sure the pace is right, so I don't mind cutting at all.

EW you trained as an actress. I wondered – in fact that is how you met Euan (husband). Did you get any jobs as an actress?

AA I tell you, writing - it has been so much – I work with people now I would never have been able to work with as an actress because I wasn't very good. Max Clifford Clarke is a fantastic director, and you work with him as a writer, sometimes I do think I would never be in this room if I was an actor.

EW has it shaped the way that you write? You know you were talking about pace.

AA there is a way, if you are acting a part, it is obvious in a way, but you are looking for your journey through something. That is very helpful. When you are writing, you are aware that you are not just writing an emotional state. You are writing a journey for somebody. And also, knowing what would work on a stage from the point of view of an actor. Actors are really good at knowing, they will read a part – one of the actors came up to me and said, you won't cut that speech will you, because I only took this job because of that speech, because it is a really good moment and I am going to be really good in it. That is how they often connect to – they know what is going to work. And the other thing, because I was an actress, I think I always think about women, writing good parts for women, that is always –

EW you wrote a play based on an 18th Century actress?

AA I wrote a play called *Playhouse Creatures*, that was about, I was given a commission and it was about the first actresses in England. Women weren't allowed on the stage until the Restoration. And actually –

EW what were the women doing before that, were they acting somewhere else?

AA no, they weren't. They were on the continent, France, women were acting, but that was a lot of research. I had to research that – what was interesting about that process was that the books I could find were written in the 50s and the 40s and they were really, they really had a sort of – 'these pioneering young women' – I had to really read between the lines to get their stories. There was just one line about one actress, 'she wasn't very good and she sank into the underworld of London'. I thought, oh my god, - I thought, that is really good, that is the sort of thing you are always looking for. So I made her character quite an important character. You are not always going to get the story, particularly if you are researching history that's, women's history or whatever – it is more intriguing, isn't it, any process, finding a little thing you can, yes –

EW tell me about the plays that have not been based on historical research.

AA the last play – I don't know why I seem to have got into writing history plays because I don't – I am aware that I don't want to be put in that sort of box. But I did write a play called *The Positive Hour* that was at the Hampstead Theatre, that was about the women's – you know, what had happened – I had been very involved in the women's movement when I was a, you know, young woman, and it was just about 1997, and I was thinking, what has happened to that energy, that organisation? So I wrote a play about that. So that was much more coming out of personal experience and – but it has apparently the worst title, *The Positive Hour*, the worst title ever.

EW so where do your people, your characters come from?

AA I was thinking about that because you said you were going to ask me that question. I think it is as if you take one part of yourself and you sort of magnify it. So it is almost as if you might take the paranoid part of yourself, all the sadistic part or whatever, and you push it as far as it would go. So you are watching one – it is really pleasurable to do that. I don't know, because you can really – it is just a good way of looking at that quality. Masks in theatre – those masks are always often just an abstracted quality of something. So I am sure that that is what you are doing, you are chasing the insecure part of yourself, just kind of seeing how far it will go. I think that is one place that characters come from.

EW I was thinking of the 18thC play, *Playhouse Creatures*. You had a lot of characters in that play. The only thing similar that I can think of in music is in counterpoint, or writing for an orchestra, you are trying to get each – each instrument has its own characteristic, its own journey, but you get them to collide.

AA Yes, that is exactly the same, I think. You are looking for those collisions, I think. If you are doing a kind of score, you don't want two characters to be the same, doing the same thing. That is not rich for a text to be like that.

EW you know the piece I was talking about yesterday, where there is a lot of unison writing, there was a point when people were playing the same things, but for a particular point. But, this idea of collision in music can be quite tricky to handle. Is it the same in plays?

AA the thing about – I don't know if it is the same in music, but in plays the kind of rule of drama is that everything has to develop through conflict, you have to have this internal conflict. I know that sounds like quite an old-fashioned idea, but I can't see, if you are not writing through conflict in some sense, you are never – you can't make a situation or moment progress or change or – you are always looking for collision in a way. I don't know if that –

EW the piece I was talking about yesterday, there is a particular interval which, there is something like a kink in it. It sounded a bit wrong, a bit edgy, and that always draws me into a bit of music, to be honest. Something that doesn't quite fit, things that don't go together. I am interested in that more than say consonant. Do you have an idea of an ideal audience?

AA I don't actually. Anybody who would want to come is my ideal audience. Really grateful for people to – not grateful, but I can't imagine – it is really hard to think of an audience as separate people anyway somehow.

EW do you feel you are writing for – you are writing for yourself? Do you see yourself in the audience, for instance?

AA I think that probably, when you are writing, you shouldn't be thinking about the audience. If you are thinking outside the piece you are doing, you are not in it. I always try not to think about what anyone else will think of it. What an audience is going to think. Because I know that means that I am bored with what I am doing, thinking ahead, on the first night I will wear this frock. No, get back to the -

EW I have to say I usually have the outfit before – I wrote an opera once, I loved that opera. And the director, before the first night, about two weeks before, sent me a fax saying I have made 27 cuts because I think the audience is going to be bored. So I said, well you can't put this opera on. Actually, he was worried what the critics would say.

AA outrageous. In a contract with a writer, he wouldn't be able to do that without your permission anyway.

EW do you invest the director with the power to think about the audience?

AA yes, I think the directors probably are thinking about kind of – they are taking something on another stage, thinking about presenting it to – putting it on a stage, I suppose you have to then – embedded in a structure of a play, you have got to think about an audience, in the sense that drama – you know, sometimes, they have knowledge that the characters don't have on stage. You – they are in the position of watching, that is always going to be the case, so you have to take them into consideration in that way. What is the experience for them? Why are you asking them, how are they going to enter this particular world you are presenting, what is it that you are asking of them? Really, that is where writing – it has taken me ages to work that out, but you have to think about their position. because that is all you are doing a play for – creating this kind of experience in that way for an audience.

EW I wonder if we have ever had this experience. The same opera that I am talking about, which was written ages ago, 1995 or something. To this day, I am in situations where one of the characters sings one of their lines.

AA the new line you mean, or an old one?

EW somebody will say something like, that wasn't an accident. But this character, through music, has become a living character who still lives with me. Does that happen to

you? Do your characters come back and speak their lines to you.

AA I don't think they do actually. I think when you are with them. The play I wrote for the RSC was based on a lot of testimony of people who lived in Warwickshire. When I first was given all that material, I just couldn't write it for a year and a half. I was going to write to the RSC and say I really can't do this. But after a year and a half had passed, suddenly what happened was the characters came alive, and I then found it quite straightforward to write. And then I was in rehearsals one day, and I thought, these people really remind me of somebody, and then I realised that it was my family, my grandmother and my mother arguing away. And I thought, that's why – it took ages for that material to go into my sort of unconscious and connect with my personal back history, and then they really came alive. Now, I don't think I could read that play without seeing those shades of people I know, but I didn't know it when I was writing it which is really –

EW did your family recognise them?

AA no, they never do, which is good. I can still go home at Christmas. Which is also curious, that they don't ever recognise themselves. The first time I ever did a play and my mum came, and I thought, that's it, she is never going to speak to me again. She came back and said, it was lovely dear.

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