

'Writing the TV series was fun. Making the TV series was not fun.'
Alan Plater recalls the bruising time he had writing his new series, *Oliver's Travels*, and asks why writers are treated so badly

Writers and wrongs

AS AN old architect friend in the North used to say, the noxious substances have collided with the rotary ventilation system in the matter of my television series, *Oliver's Travels*. This is a definitive attempt to set the record straight, or at least bend it to match my perception and prejudice.

Oliver's Travels is about a man called *Oliver* who goes on a journey from south Wales to the Orkneys. On the way he falls in love with a woman called *Diane* and together they have thrilling adventures and solve a murder mystery.

Writing the novel was fun. Writing the TV series was fun. Making the TV series was not fun: hence

this trip along the path reserved for writers who feel the majesty of their vision has been sullied. If you look carefully, you'll see the footprints of, among others, Andrew Davies, David Lodge and Ian Curteis.

I wrote the series for Tom Courtenay, a friend since teenage years. It was developed under the aegis of David Cunliffe, formerly of Yorkshire TV, where we had great times together making the *Beiderbecke* Trilogy. David is now part of WorldWide TV, an independent company. We peddled *Oliver* around the usual suspects. There are only three: C4, ITV Network Centre or the BBC, which has nine doors, but only one room, as we were to discover.

C4 loved the scripts but felt the piece was too downmarket for them. ITV loved the scripts but felt the piece was too upmarket for them. BBC Scotland and BBC Wales loved the scripts and didn't mention markets at all. Innocently, I suggested a co-production between the two national regions, reflecting the geography of the story, without realising the labyrinthine complexities of such an idea. Eventually it was

agreed the show would be made under the umbrella of BBC Wales but, like everything else with a budget bigger than the weather forecast, it had to be rubber-stamped at BBC TV Centre.

The man with the rubber stamp was also carrying a sledgehammer. The message came: we will make the series *only* if you cast Alan Bates as *Oliver* and you have 24 hours to make up your mind.

The arguments in favour of accepting the deal were: a year-and-a-half's work was at stake: Alan Bates is a wonderful actor: WorldWide TV and BBC Wales could use the jobs; and most persuasive, a passionate plea from a fellow-playwright, that the original, writer-led, popular

identical in principle. Two of our suggestions were rejected, for unspecified reasons, and eventually the assorted soviets agreed on Giles Foster, best known for his work on *Silas Marner* and *Hotel du Lac*.

There are a million broad acres in the world of TV drama but any objective analysis will tell you that Giles and I come from very different parts of the forest. It is therefore no surprise that he and his team, though highly talented and well-intentioned, misunderstood the tone of the piece. My work tends to be low-key comedy, charred at the edges with melancholy and the remembrance of something precious that was lost so long ago, nobody quite remembers what it was. It flourishes

best with invisible acting and direction. You can't be noisy and laconic at the same time. The golden rule is: the characters never know that what is happening is funny. Getting it right is tough and about 10 times harder than it looks on the page.

The first request from the team was that I should cut the scripts because they were too long. I protested, I was over-ruled, cut the scripts and we have ended up with a five-part series because there wasn't enough material to fill six.

In hindsight never around when you really need it. Giles wanted to make the show look good which, in their terms, meant never using a small, dog-eared location my usual preference if a big, spectacular one was available.

So much for places. The people are even more important. A key element in the story is the gradual change in speech patterns as *Oliver* journeys north, a gentle exploration of the richness and diversity of language. Someone in the casting department had a tin ear and I wasted an unnecessary amount of time re-writing to explain why, for example, a kid born

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drama series, which gave us *Penies from Heaven*, *Edge of Darkness* and *GBH* was under threat and *Oliver* could be the equivalent of *Custer's Last Stand*.

The argument against acceptance was the inevitable betrayal of a valued friend. After 24 hours I called my agent and said: take the pieces of silver. The friendship survives but it's been a damn close-run thing.

It is no part of the argument that Tom is a better actor than Alan or vice versa, but that the imposition of an actor -- any actor -- as a prerequisite of production finance is arrogant nonsense. The rationale was that Alan was "sexier casting" than Tom -- "sexier" in this case having nothing to do with sex and everything to do with marketing concepts.

The horse-trading over the choice of director was different in detail,



and bred on the Welsh borders speaks with an East End accent.

Finally, we have the Big Moment Syndrome. Directors like to have these in the final reel -- witness the circus coming to town in *Persuasion* and the hot air balloons in *The Choir*. In the final episode of *Oliver* we have mummies.

On the mainland of Orkney, *Oliver* tells the story of *Magnus the Martyr*, the legend of the ancient Norse rulers of the islands. The legend is a metaphor for the series and it seemed best to tell it clearly and simply, by word of mouth. The request from Giles ran: could we open it up, make it visual and go for the poetic solution, using the device of a mummies play in the marketplace? I gave it my best shot. Hand on heart, I did try, on condition I could subvert the idea from within, by making them a fringe touring company from Basildon. The result, instead of clarifying the story of



Magnus, is to confuse it. We are still arguing about this.

In the olden and golden days, when TV drama was made in the studio, there was a tacit acceptance that it was a writer's medium. The directors had come from the theatre and they treated the work of Alun Owen and David Mercer with the same respect they would a text by Ibsen or Chekov. Now drama is made on film, the writer/director relationship grows distant and, at times, needlessly distrustful. Lynda La Plante and Alan Bleasdale now take executive producer roles on their own original work. As Alan said to me, succinctly: "I'm the guy that fucks up the script now."

But this, in any case, misses the point. Once into production it was made clear that the team — initially David Cunliffe and myself — was not trusted. How else are we to interpret the veto over our choice of principal casting and director? It is

equivalent to Rupert Murdoch picking the England cricket team for one-day internationals according to spurious research into likely audience ratings.

This is not to deny the broadcasters ultimate editorial responsibility; but they held the same responsibility 10, 20, 30 years ago, when in-house producers of the calibre of David Rose, Rosemary Hill, Innes Lloyd, Betty Willingale, Howard Baker and David Cunliffe himself had a creative autonomy that today's independent producers can only dream about.

As for the writers, we have more people telling us how to do our work than ever in the history of the alphabet, and many express pained surprise that we are not more grateful for their help. In the formative stages of any project there are now at least six chiefs to every Indian. Is it any wonder the tribes are restless? And as for poor old Oliver, the

Alan Plater: 'why the hell is that little bald guy making a fuss?'

PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]

audience will decide. There's much to admire in it, in the acting of Alan Bates, Sinead Cusack and the peerless Bill Paterson, and in loving cameos from John Woodvine, Charlie Hardwicke, Peter Vaughan, Iain Cuthbertson, Sheila Reid et al — most of whom, in accordance with current practice, had to show up on the day and deliver instant performances.

It's possible that the audience might think the whole thing is terrific, especially the mummings, and wonder why the hell that little bald guy who wrote it is making such a fuss. That's fair comment, though I reserve my right to say: on the whole I prefer the book.

Oliver's Travels starts on Sunday June 11 on BBC1 at 9.05pm