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Have pen—will write

London Weekend Television was described by Milton Shulman of the London Evening Standard as 'one of the few companies making slight genuflections towards the goal of more mature viewing.' None of us would like this remark to be taken in isolation as a value judgement on our activities to date especially when he adds that 'Even London Weekend has assured us that more comedy shows are on the way to cheer up their audiences and presumably their advertisers' — as if this was something to be ashamed of.

The daily rough and tumble of television is often incomprehensible to someone not involved unless you know what we are trying to do and how we are

setting about it. Therefore, it may help if I set out a few truisms about television scripts in general and our own requirements in particular. The first — often glibly quoted and as often smilingly brushed aside — is that with the possible exception of live current affairs programmes, all television starts with a script. Not only starts but structures upwards from that point. It is therefore the quality of the script which decides the quality of the production. But there is still a reluctance in many quarters to accept this as a fact of life.

When I first joined the business after the war, I worked for the late Ted Kavanagh, whose *ITMA It's That Man Again* programmes helped to keep



Fig.1 'Thank U Very Much for the Family Circle' — a play in the series — *Company of Five*.



Fig.2 A scene from 'A Little Milk of Human Kindness' by Ernie Geblen

our morale airborne through the war years. Ted had graduated by his own talent and energy from being a 'packet of Players' writer to one of the highest paid men in the business. When I asked him what a 'packet of Players' writer meant, he told me that when he started in the game, variety stars were thought to write their own material (and often did). The status of the script writer as such stood at a threadbare zero. If you had ideas and wanted them done, you got together with the star concerned, usually in a bar, and if he took your stuff, later to pass it off as his own, he would reward you should he be feeling generous, with a packet of cigarettes, at that time costing a shilling for twenty. Things have moved on a little since then.

So writers are the lifeblood of television. How do we set about getting them? The answer is twofold. They come to you or you go out and look for what you want. So far as the first method is concerned I suppose every television company in the world has a script department to deal with that fluctuating tide of unsolicited material which ebbs and flows with every post. The idea dies hard that anyone with a bent ballpoint pen can write a television script, (the other endearing remark is 'Do you mean to say people get *paid* to write that stuff?').

I would say that more than 95% of the scripts which arrive in this way – for all the heartache that has been put into them – are for one reason or another useless. However *all* the scripts we receive are responsibly read, in the first place by an independent panel of readers and then by interested producers. If a glimmer of talent peeps out everything is done to fan the flame, not out of benevolence, but simply because there are never enough good

writers to supply the market. But writing is a tough game and the mud to pearls ratio in unsolicited scripts is a high one.

THE VALUE OF AGENTS

The second method – going out and getting what you want – depends in great measure upon that hard driving and often maligned bunch of hidden persuaders – the agents. A good working relationship with literary agents you can trust is absolutely essential to any television company. They save you time and they find you what you want. Agents live from 10% of their clients' earnings and therefore, although they are selling to you, they are in a crucial position in operating the law of supply and demand. They are brokers in a very active market and quite apart from your requirements must be continuously aware on a day to day basis of what is going on with the other fourteen independent television companies and the BBC.

So, in a business so dominated by the time factor it can easily be seen that an agent with a strong list of professional writers can be invaluable.

Now as to what we want, television companies, like book publishers, are individual in their tastes and requirements. London Weekend Television, as its name implies, has the weekend franchise for the London area consisting of some 15 million viewers and operating from 7 p.m. Friday until close-down on Sunday night. It was part of the understanding on which London Weekend were given the franchise that they would do their best to brighten up weekend viewing. This is a formidable task. There obviously must be something for everyone – and pleasing all of the people all of the time is just as

impossible as fooling them.

Moreover, although one of two London companies, London Weekend needs to network as much as possible. This means convincing the other independent companies and their viewers that what they are offering London audiences will also be acceptable in the far north and the far west, to say nothing of Granadaland and the new Yorkshire area.

I suppose if there is a bias in what they are trying to do it is towards comedy. How else could it be with someone like Frank Muir as Head of the Entertainment Unit? Comedy is perhaps the trickiest area of all in which to operate. To begin with everyone has an individual idea of what comedy is about. One definition is that it is simply what makes people laugh. On that basis people laugh at a great many different things and, what is worse, don't laugh at a great many more.

OVERSEAS SALES

English situation comedy is in full flower these days. Unlike the machine-made jobs to which we have all become accustomed, the home product has a refreshingly live and spontaneous taste. Paradoxically this carries with it an inbuilt snag and that is that the language, the flavour, the subject matter and the pace all combine to make these comedy series one hundred per cent successful only to English audiences – for which of course they are primarily made. Maybe I'll be surprised but I would not rate the chances of selling the current, very successful series 'Please Sir' in the Middle West of America as very high. Cynics will say it is another example of the two great nations being divided by a common language but in any case the exportability factor seems low. Scale down the problem then to that of London and the provinces or regions and it doesn't take an Einstein to see some of the traps they have carefully to avoid in their everyday working lives.

Situation comedy – particularly the best of it which looks so deceptively simple – requires a highly specialized writing skill. Moreover it is one which is constantly, and subtly, changing as indeed is the life it reflects. The practitioners of this art are few and highly paid. Since the companies invest in success, they are never afraid of lashing out money for the quality they have got to achieve. To find that quality, nurture it and put it to work is another matter. It is always a gala day when a new talent with some bright fresh ideas suddenly comes up like the sun.

First principles

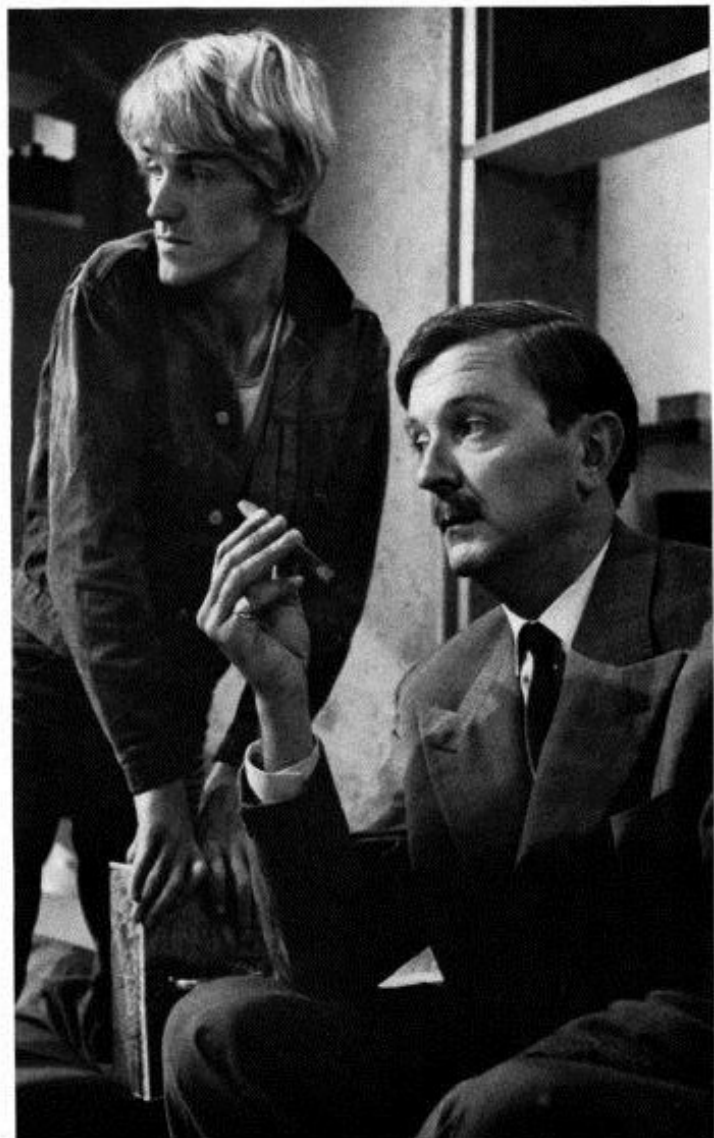
To brief non-professional writers on what is wanted is difficult without launching out into an analysis of comedy. As if one knew! At times it feels as if you are picking your way through a mine field with a corkscrew as your mine detector. Perhaps the simplest definition is that all good comedy – indeed all good writing – must be based on truth. Even the wildest fantasy has its own interior integrity. Successful comedy starts from acute observation and understanding of life. A funny situation is the end product of characters grappling with problems, big

and small in which they are true to themselves.

So much of the material rejected starts the other way round and works back from what people – or some people – think is funny. 'You see, there's this rather quaint advertising agency a bit down on its luck . . .' It's the characters and their relationships which matter to a story not the situation into which they are somehow or other forced. All too often the ideas offered seem to be the result of having to spend half an hour in a station bar after missing a train. The best writing always appears deceptively simple. It isn't! A good surgeon can whip out an appendix in a matter of minutes but how many years did he spend learning to get it right?

The same basic principles apply to the drama output. At present the company is in the market for contemporary plays of approximately an hour in length. If the quality is exceptional, the number of characters and sets don't really matter but obviously, within reason, the fewer the better. Again it so often happens that the more skilled the writer the more economical are the requirements he makes for the

Fig.3 An outstanding new play – 'The Franchise Trail' by Nemone Lethbridge



actual physical production of his play. At present London Weekend has no 30 minute play slots and plays of 75 or 90 minutes in length, although a few are produced, make for difficulties in networking. These are practical details that professional writers accept and understand. Debutant writers should look on such guidance as a would-be sailor faced with navigational hazards. Anyone jumping into a boat and sailing off into the blue would be well advised to study a chart before he sets off so as not to run smartly aground as he leaves harbour. Incredible as it may seem there are still people who never watch television and who yet put in scripts which they hope to sell.

REJECTIONITIS

Such are the demands of television as to quantity that any writer suffering from rejectionitis can console himself with the certainty that if he has quality of any kind he is certain to be produced sooner or later either by London Weekend, by other commercial companies or by the BBC. Television, like the film business which makes its profit from the 15–25 year olds, is a young and alive medium. Of course there is a fashion in what goes out at any given time and fashions change. But the range is wide and if a writer has anything to say, he will sooner or later find himself saying it in millions of living rooms. There is a big differentiating factor between tele-

vision and the theatre or cinema which must also be remembered when scripting plays for the box. The audience effect is missing. Television communication, like that of a book, is to one person or a very small group of people at any one time. This adds to the difficulties of doing comedy and that is why a studio audience is so often essential when a play is recorded. The warmth of reaction affects the pace of the play and it accentuates the life. To add a laugh track, as is transatlantic practice, gives the production a different feel and at times even works against the play.

As I said earlier on, it all starts with the writer. So the problem is to make writers feel at home. Two things do this – understanding and money. In the nature of things London Weekend tend to commission work from writers whose quality and reliability we respect but this in no sense excludes any writer with something real to say. The company has only been on the air since August 1968 and because of the industrial troubles which beset independent television at that time it was not an easy start. But an early warning system for talent is operated, and they also do their best to encourage writers who may not perhaps have got it right the first time but who look as though they're going to make their mark, as London Weekend in turn, hopes they will do in the world of television.

(Pictures from London Weekend)



Fig.4 'Arthur Gifford is Alive and Well in Stoke Newington' – a play in the series – Company of Five