

## **Themes for writing**

Rikki Beadle Blair

The way I write...

When writing a project, I start by pitching it to myself. What is it going to be about? Why must I write it? What's interesting and different about it? What medium is it going to be in? What is its focus? What do I want to explore and learn? And then I make decisions in answer to those questions, e.g.:

I want to write something about the black experience of the Nazi Holocaust.

Because so few have written narratives on this subject or even know about it.

I must be the one who writes it because it combines my interest in history with my passion for diverse representations alongside my experience as a black man who has been in a long-term relationship with a Jewish partner and their family.

It will be a play, possibly later a book and/or film.

Its focus will be on a black man in the 1930s, working for a German-Jewish family who falls in love with the daughter of the house. It will follow how they all face the threat of the rising racist totalitarian regime. The Nazis.

I want to explore both the experience of being black in Nazi Germany and the concentration camps. Also how someone who might co-exist happily with Jewish and black people might be seduced, radicalised into actively or passively assisting in their oppression. So I need a German character. I want to understand why people stay where they are unwelcome or even attacked. I want to understand Nazi Germany. I love to write about things I

don't yet understand and hopefully discover and acknowledge kinship with characters and attitudes that initially seem alien to me. When I find that challenge, I'm ready to get started.

So the questions are clear and I'm ready to cast it. I start meeting with actors to write the roles for: I call this shopping for ingredients. I know I'm going to make a cake. Is this a chocolate cake? Or a lemon cake? Icing? Wholemeal? Sugar-free? I see what's out there and let the ingredients speak to me. Of course, they have to go together well. It's all on instinct. Auditions are more like conversations. Does this person stimulate me? Will they connect with the subject matters? How do the cast contrast and complement one another? It's the search for inspiration.

So once the team is assembled, we all sit around a large table strewn with snacks for a few sessions and talk. And talk and talk. It could be about the subject of the project, or it could be about the weather, the commute or what's in the news. Of course, if you have a cast with a mutual interest or demographic they will want to talk about these things, often excited to be in a room full of people with a shared passion. Debates can go on for hours or even days. Meanwhile, I'm drinking them all in, their voices, their characteristics, histories, quirks, rhythms, individual vibes and interactive chemistry. There's no devising or improvising. When they ask, I will explain what processes are taking place in my mind so far, which is usually not much at first. I'm letting them inspire me, just by being around them and imagining them playing characters in a play. Sometimes the characters are like them and sometimes I'm excited by creating a transforming challenge for an actor. It's pretty much instinctive. I'm mostly searching for keys to the lock in my brain. Trying to identify the entry point for the narrative.

After a few sessions I usually start to write and then bring the play in installments and the actors will read it, sometimes we get up to block out some moves and then chat about what I've written a bit and then we sit

down again and continue our conversational wanderings. And all the while my brain is solving the everyday puzzle of the writer... what next what next what next? I'm in a bit of daze all day now, whether in rehearsal or not. I become absent-minded and lose stuff a lot, phones, clothes, even cars.

The script is usually written in the order that the audience sees it. Sometimes I go down dead-ends and go back to cut and rewrite – especially near the beginning of the process, but then there's a point when suddenly I catch a wave and I'm surfing. The script is writing itself. And the scenes come thick and fast.

Essentially that's the goal, to find a compelling idea, an exciting inspiring cast of characters and a strong plot – and get the script to write itself. With variations in the process, a few dozen theatre and film scripts have come together like this. Essentially I'm compelled to create a family and search within myself to find a play for them to perform. It can be somewhat scary – often I am still writing up until opening night, and we don't know until then how the play ends – but it's always exciting and rewarding and I'm every bit as excited to work on a play as I was when I was a kid. I remain thrilled. The plays are still writing themselves. In a way, they are writing me.

### **Rikki Beadle-Blair**

Rikki Beadle-Blair MBE is a writer, director, composer, choreographer, designer, producer and performer working in film, theatre, television and radio, having written and directed 30 plays over the last 20 years, along with several feature films, shorts and tv episodes and series. He has won several awards including a Sony Radio Award, and a Los Angeles Outfest Screenwriting and Outstanding Achievement award. Rikki's passion for encouraging creativity and business sense in

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A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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