

## **This is a love story**

Rikki Beadle-Blair

The first words I ever remember saying were, 'I'm going to be a writer,' whenever my teenage mum would stand me up in front of visitors and say, 'Tell 'em what you're going to be when you grow up.'

Monica had come to London from Jamaica only a few years earlier at the age of twelve and she was determined to give her son the strongest possible start in life as a 'Lickle English boy'. She taught me to read almost as soon as I could speak and by the time I was three-going-on-four I had fallen head over heels in love with the written word. And I just kept falling. By the time I was five, I had three library cards so that I could take a total of nine books home with me twice a week to devour. I was the little Book Monster – like the Cookie Monster, but way more 'precocious'. I heard that word a lot around me – and I loved it. I loved all words. Words could tell stories and stories could be time machines. Stories could be rocket ships able to transport people to other worlds. Stories were like Noah's little white dove bringing back tiny clues of what was out there somewhere for us if we just managed to stay afloat and keep going. And I loved writers for giving them to me. Writers were my babysitters. Writers were my teachers and life coaches. Writers were my brilliant older siblings, and I wanted to be just like them when I grew up. Books led me to the mountaintop, from where on a clear day I could see forever. It didn't matter that we were living in Rachmanesque bedsits and halfway houses, before being lucky enough to

move onto a Dickensian rat-infested 1960s council estate. Whenever I was reading or writing I was transported to what felt like the top of the world. And as soon as I was old enough to have a dream, I knew – I was going to be novelist.

But then I discovered theatre. Oh my days, theatre! The lights! The laughter! The electric buzzing of a crowded, excited and exciting room. A place where a building full of humanity could experience one person's writing together at the same time and place and yet each have a thrillingly wide range of individual debate-sparking perceptions and reactions. Afro Caribbean theatre – like panto and the original Shakespearean theatre – is a raucously responsive and exhilarating experience. It was like church! Epic stories, uplifting music, and a family of strangers sharing a roller-coaster of emotions. The first time I went to the theatre, I was reborn. And when I realised that theatre along with cinema, television and radio plays all had scripts. And scripts had writers! My destiny became clear. I was a scriptwriter.

I spent the rest of my childhood and adolescence writing writing writing reading reading reading writing writing writing. Adapting theatre, film and television scripts from repeated viewing and memory, writing my own plays specially for my friends to act out in the estate stairwells. Learning how to create ambitious productions out of the huge cardboard boxes that were tossed out of the many local Bermondsey factories along with castoffs from our parents' wardrobes. It became an all-consuming obsession, an often totally exhausting endeavour. And I loved every single second. Each play was a challenging new mountain to scale. And I was determined to get up there and take in the view.

Of course, when I went out into the world in my mid-teens, naively intending to make a living out of all this, the learning curve became Everest-or Eiger-steep. The challenges were countless and daunting. There were

so few great non-white working-class writers, actors or directors in the seventies, and those that there were appeared to be American. But in British theatre, television and film? Forget about it. That was the feedback over and over again: 'Forget about it.' But writing was my secret weapon. I could write myself roles to play, projects to direct. And I did. And along the way, I learned how to pitch.

It took me a while to understand that, for a writer, pitching is not just a necessary evil, it's an essential skill. Whether you want to attract an audience, get projects financed, entice collaborators or publishers or a producer – or if you simply want to get stuff written and know what you're doing, where it's going and why – you need to learn to pitch. Especially to yourself. This, after years of revulsion at the concept of the tacky desperate elevator pitch came as a total revelation to me. When you can clearly state and encapsulate what a project is for and what you want to achieve, it is infinitely easier to achieve. Or at least you know what is you are trying to achieve. So after years of resisting and railing against pitching, I finally resolved to get great at it and dedicated serious energy to making it a central skill. Along with plotting, structure, complex characterisation, episodic peaks, and all of the rest of it. I was going to become a pitch ninja. And I did. And on the way, I discovered, to my surprise... it was actually fun!

What's more, things really started to happen. I achieved my mainstream breakthrough writing the 1995 movie *Stonewall* for the BBC, followed by a series of commissions for various production companies and studios including my own Channel 4 series *Metrosexuality*, which I also directed. Since then I have worked in theatre, film, TV, radio, publishing, both as a freelancer and with my own creative production company, but the core skill has always been my first love: writing. When no one would

hire me as director, I just wrote myself something. When I discovered talented people that were being ignored, I'd write them something. And I wrote a lot. Plays, films, TV series, radio plays, documentaries, inspirational meme books, you name it. But you know what? It wasn't enough.

When I finally got to that place where I was being taken seriously in 'the business', a couple of things repeatedly occurred to me: (1) however prolific I get I will never tell all the stories I want to see told or personally explore all the corners of society that my curious spirit wants to witness, explore and attempt to understand, and (2) more people should be out there teaching emerging writers (of all ages) all the stuff it's taken me 50+ years of being a writer to learn. And so I found myself starting to commit more and more energy to the cause of mentoring. And it's been amazing. Writers I've mentored and encouraged – often in tandem with my long-standing business partner and co-mentor, John Gordon – have gone on to have their work performed at countless venues including the Royal Court, the RSC, the Soho, the Arcola, the Tristan Bates Theatre, the Bush Theatre, the Park Theatre, the King's Head, Theatre Royal Stratford East and in the West End. They've become writer-directors, writer-producers, artistic directors of theatres, CEOs of production companies, Hollywood show-runners. They are black, white, East Asian, South Asian, Middle-Eastern, Northerners, Southerners, Scousers, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Midlanders, East European, American, Canadian, Antipodean, gay, straight, bi, heteroflexible, male, female, non-binary, trans.... every class, every race, every sex, gender, age and every gender identity. I've made it my mission to encourage as many people as I can to write a play or a film or a book. Many of them struggle, some take long sabbaticals, some sadly give up, but most of them do it. It often takes years and just as often takes

tears... but they do it. We've regularly put together festivals of new writing to showcase their work and over a hundred of them have shown their work to packed houses and had their first audience Q & A and learned their craft the best way. I've always drawn writers to me from the creative margins, people who feel that they are not typical mainstream playwrights – which of course, turns out to be everybody. Even the whitest straightest most middle-class male has stories inside that people don't expect them to have. And when they feel like they won't be judged for their inner life, it's amazing what they choose to express.

And just as amazing, has been just how much I have gained from all this. Once again the cliché has proved so true: We teach what we need to learn. I have learned so much more than I have taught. About storytelling and structure, about creative businesses, people, about the potency of words. About how to stay relevant. How to maintain enthusiasm. All the things it takes to be – and stay – a writer.

Here are some of the headlines that come up repeatedly:

### **THERE ARE TWO RULES FOR GETTING THE WORK DONE**

1. Start
2. Finish.

Get to step one and you're already part of an elite group. Get to number two and you're ready to become a wizard, Harry.

Writing is hard. Nerve-racking, even kind of scary. It's definitely not for wimps.

## **HAVE THE UGLY BABY**

Babies are not at their cutest when they're born – the strangest colour emerging from a bedraggled, hoarse, exhausted mother. Let go of the idea that what you produce must be instantly presentable. Nature is messy and undignified. You can clean it up later.

## **THERE ARE TWO RULES FOR EXCELLENCE**

1. Rewrite
2. Cut

Actually that should be Rewrite Rewrite Rewrite and Cut Cut Cut.

It's always exciting to see a writer suddenly realise that cutting the work down to its essence can be like pruning vegetation to help it grow healthily. Never forget the St Exupéry quote: 'Perfection is reached not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.'

## **FOCUS ON STORY AND YOUR THEMES WILL ALWAYS REVEAL THEMSELVES**

Character is action. Story is theme. When someone asks you, 'What's it about?' never just say, 'Relationships'. What relationships? Tell a great story and the reader will do the rest.

## **IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE CRAFT**

It's always amazing to us how many aspiring writers don't read. People write to us asking how to format a play or a screenplay or a short story/novel. Answer: Read one. Read lots of them. Athletes study other athletes. That's how you get good. Become an expert in your field.

### **WRITE. A LOT.**

Another one that seems so obvious. However naturally brilliant they are, no one is excellent by accident. Picasso painted a lot of pictures. Shakespeare wrote a lot of plays. Fred Astaire danced until his feet blistered and bled. When you read interviews with great artists who announce, 'I don't pay attention to what others in my field are doing' they've usually peaked and are on the way out.

### **NEVER FORGET THIS IS WHAT YOU LOVE**

When you get jaded, find out what's jading you. Are you working with less enthusiastic collaborators, or need more committed peers? Are you yourself being lazy, unappreciative or arrogant? Get back to the place and the mindset that makes this all fun. Never forget you only ever really work for yourself.

### **GRANT APPLICATIONS ARE CREATIVE ENDEAVOURS**

So many writers think that filling in forms is beneath us, or lies outside of our skillset. It's bang in the middle of it. Take responsibility for clarifying and expressing your intentions. You're an ambassador for your vision.

### **YES, WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW, BUT YOU CAN ALSO WRITE WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW**

You can explore identities and histories outside of your own. Shakespeare did it all the time and found himself in all kinds of bodies, locations and histories.

## **SUPPORT OTHER CREATIVES**

Writing is often a solitary pursuit, but it doesn't have to be lonely. Create and support expressive communities. Everyone needs friends. Everyone needs some kind of family. It's easier to keep going if you have company. Reach out. Support and you will be supported. Teach and you will never stop learning. And what could be more exciting than that?

### **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 others has led him to becoming a committed mentor to a great many writers, actors, composers and directors around the world.

**[teamangelica.com](http://teamangelica.com)**

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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