

Rewriting history

Testament

I am sat in a local library.

From the table where I'm sat, I can see a bank of computers running along a wall and two elderly people sat there hunched filling out some sort of online forms. Slowly. To my left is an old photocopier that I've never seen used, and to my right is a large sash window that looks out onto a park. It's sunny.

I am writing.

I am writing something.

I am writing a something about real people.

I am trying to write something about real people that really existed.

Real people that are well documented, well-known people.

No pressure.

Just don't get anything wrong.

At all.

I think.

Writing something that is actual history brings with it a whole load of open manhole covers.

History is dangerous.

In the last few years, a number of big productions have come under fire for their lack of historical accuracy. *The Crown* on Netflix, the Broadway hit *Hamilton* and the Academy Award-winning biopic *Queen* all took great liberties with real events and each has faced some sort of backlash.

Of course, to make a story work and be dramatically satisfying there is usually some tinkering with the truth. After all, reality doesn't often fit into a three-act structure with a neat emotional payoff. There is an argument that all these portrayals are art and consequently the audience shouldn't be foolish enough to take them at face value and treat fiction as fact.

There is, however, a sense that if members of the audience do not know the actual details of events in the portrayal, this may be the only version of history they get. Not many Brits had ever heard of Alexander Hamilton before the musical. On one hand, there is a responsibility to educate while entertaining, on the other, if the fiction in the production is exciting and at least portrays some central story beats accurately, the audience may be inspired to seek out the facts for themselves.

Sometimes, when the events are within living memory, or perhaps if they have a passionate contemporary following, getting it wrong can really affect how the work is perceived. Or, if a highly fictionalised work is canonised, it can distort how we view historical figures or events for generations. How many people think Richard III actually had a hunchback because of Shakespeare's play? Or even worse, how were Native Americans or black Africans portrayed in the films of the 1950s and 60s? These groups still have to deal with those stereotypes today.

They say 'history is written by the victors', which means for those writers who are involved on the losing side and hold integrity dear, there is a challenge to confront accepted narratives – especially when they are problematic. If the work of writer is to write, when it comes to history and historical fiction the work of the writer is to re-write.

The goal for us as writers is to have our cake and eat it. To have a story that works, while retaining as much historical integrity as possible. There are many ways to achieve this: one can use disclaimers – and, indeed, the characters themselves can step out of the story, Brechtian style, and tell us that 'it didn't really happen like this'. But that can compromise a dramatic moment or break the tone of a piece. Sometimes, it is the picking of a singular moment from a person's life, or (as more typically seen in biopics) jumping into different moments of a life that are threaded together to create a cohesive story arc. However, this writing through omission brings its own problems.

How much are we tied to an exact representation of the person or event? A balancing act is required. And perhaps a different balance is required on different projects.

Back in the library.

I am not writing.

Nope.

I'm struggling.

I hate writing.

I give up.

And now I'm wondering why I became a writer?

Then I remember my own history with writing history.

Blake Remixed

I came into this from being a rapper, ventured into spoken word, and then made my own theatre show. In 2012, I got my first bit of funding to make my first piece of theatre. A piece of theatre that was heavily in debt to one of the most iconic figures in British literary history.

Blake Remixed premiered at the Edinburgh Festival in 2015 and was a play about William Blake, hip hop and me.

As an artist, I've always felt it important, as the rap aphorism goes, to 'keep it real'. Thankfully, most of the show was autobiographical and, although William Blake was central to the piece, it was mostly about my *perception* of Blake and his work rather than an attempt to recreate it or portray his

life. So, this wasn't a Blake biography – more a story which wove in how his work influenced my life and how I found parallels within hip hop, and UK rap in particular.

I had been a lifelong Blake fan at that point, so there was a familiarity with the image I had built up of him as an artist. Even so, this was the first time I was going to present anything directly related to Blake on stage... to an audience. No pressure, right?

I dedicated a lot of time to researching Blake's life and works to make sure I was representing valid perspectives. The online Blake Archive and Peter Ackroyd's biography *Blake* were the foundations for that. As well as walks and lectures from the Blake Society, listening to podcasts from around the world, cramming in various other books and even one or two degree dissertations.

As the show got closer to completion, and collaborators, dramaturgs and directors got involved, the huge history section of the show ended up being reduced somewhat. This was because the real drama of the piece was about Blake's work speaking to me – rather than being a TED talk (or worse, a Wikipedia entry).

History still played its part. One aspect of Blake's work that particularly spoke to me was his relationship with race. In many ways he seemed ahead of his time – he wrote against slavery, he was an engraver for abolitionist literature, and in his poem *The Divine Image* he stated, 'all must love the human form,/ In heathen, Turk, or Jew.'

However, we don't view history in a vacuum – we view it from today's moral and cultural standpoints. For me, Blake's anti-slavery writings, while

well meaning, have patronising and problematic elements (*The Little Black Boy*, for example). Indeed, the *Blake Remixed* show reflected my evolving relationship with Blake's work over the years, with both the tension and inspiration that brings with it, especially to me as a person of colour.

A few weeks into the show's Edinburgh run, I overheard someone in the bar arguing with the producer. A man was arguing that Blake was an abolitionist so couldn't have been racist. To him, Blake was a working-class hero and voice against injustice. I thanked him and explained I agreed, but pointed out some problematic examples to show where I was coming from – and his face dropped, especially when I quoted the Blake texts he was unfamiliar with. Turns out he was a reviewer who had made a few assumptions and had unfortunately already turned in his review for publication the following day. Even when one *DOES* do the history homework, it doesn't mean the critics have. (Two stars, apparently).

When the show toured London, I invited a rapper friend to come and watch; he replied that he was not going to attend as he had had enough of 'old white dead guys', referring to Blake. While I sympathise with the fact that white male cultural hegemony continues to dominate the canon, history still affects us all. My play's subtext holds open the question, HOW do we appreciate the good stuff in history and what do we do about the bad? Is the value in art abstracted from history, or is the context always king? And most importantly, what do we do about that in our lives *TODAY*?

The challenge for me as a person of colour is to work out how to navigate history in writing about it. Writing or re-writing history was something that became a greater focus soon after the experience of *Blake Remixed*.

Black Men Walking

A year later, I was approached by Eclipse Theatre to write a play that turned into *Black Men Walking*. The finished play alternated between the drama of a contemporary Black men's walking group and poetic snapshots in the minds of historical characters, alternating between naturalistic dialogue and spoken word. The contemporary group, though fictional, was inspired by a real-life Yorkshire-based African-Caribbean walking group and some of the social and political objectives of the group.

There were four historical figures who appeared in the show, ranging from famous figures like Roman emperor Septimius Severus, about whom much is known, to the more obscure figure of John Moore the Blackmoore (of whom all we know is that he purchased the keys to York as a freeman in 1687). To try and capture what could be plausible portraits of these figures required a great deal of research – especially when trying to fill in details and specifics from the right periods and locations – and then to tie the research into the contemporary lives portrayed in the play and its wider themes. I needed not only to capture the broad brushstrokes of the African presence in Britain going back to the first century, but to evoke character with a sense of authenticity. I felt I needed to zoom into the fine textures and pinpoint elements for the audience to relate to. I ended up working into the night, Googling the trade guilds in Tudor York, the process for making flour, and on and on. I also watched films and TV programmes set in the different periods to get imagery and language into my brain. Crucially, I went on walks with the real-life walking group; as we in Britain know, bits of history litter our countryside. One has a sense of not just walking through the terrain but of what might have been there in previous ages: ruins of cottages, Roman forts, pathways walked for centuries now located next to BMW filled carparks, telecommunication masts and sandwich shops.

Once I got a sense of my characters' environments and the kinds of issues they might have lived with, I then populated the world they lived in, and tried to speculate within reason on aspects of their personality and consciousness.

Writing in a poetic voice allows the reader (or audience member) to fill in imagery and detail. So, although I had dug into cultural and political specifics of the day, the challenge was to paint only a sketch that focused on the inner life and conflicts of each historical character (and then to juxtapose that with the fictional contemporary characters). For example, at one point in Septimius' poem we hear:

This land still has echoes of the resolute renegades,
Remnants of the Brigante tribe's not yet relented
British savages

Before I embarked on the research, I didn't have a clue about the history being retold here. I had to find out a) what the political situation was like in Britain under Septimius, and found pockets of resistance to the Roman Empire from the Brigantes in the north of England where the play is set. And b) I had to find out Roman attitudes to race. Very broadly, the Romans viewed indigenous Brits as savages. Both these facts were very useful for the themes of the play in which contemporary characters are thinking about their black identities after the British Empire in which Africans were stereotyped as savages. The main protagonist, Thomas, is proudly 'Yorkshire stubborn'. This aspect of changes in the way people are identified added colour commentary to the Septimius poem which actually focused on his relationship with his sons, another meta-theme of 'forefathers' and 'ancestors' in the play.

History, then, not just a portrayal of a millennia ago but a commentary on the present.

New work

In 2019, I was asked to write play for a theatre I really admire by a brilliant literary manager I look up to. They challenged me to push myself and to write something with an 'epic quality'.

When I hear the word 'epic' I think 'historical' ('historical epics') and, of course, grand scale or huge themes. My first thought when working with the theatre was to think of the city it was in and my relationship to it (I'd grown up there). It is a British city renowned for civic pride and civic identity, which amplifies some truths – the legacy of being an industrial powerhouse, its social reformers and its artistic significance – while sidelining others: its intrinsic links to Empire and colonialism, its famous bigots and history of exploitation. The play I ended up working on was in essence about the city's relationship with its own history (and by extension, the country's relationship to its history).

Through a friend's mum (who is an author and librarian), I found out about a real-life Victorian black man from the city. Further research linked him to great writers of his day. This extraordinary man was part of a hidden history of the city in which his life intersects with many issues we are dealing with today, from sexism and police brutality to the nature of writing itself.

Although the play has characters from other periods in the city's history, the protagonists that carry the action are all fictionalised versions of real-life figures. They were people who lived and breathed in the city's streets and whose lives, I hoped, would help speak to now.

My research included trips to museums, private libraries, meetings with historians, ordering out-of-print works from other countries, reading periodicals from the era and, most especially, reading works written by the historical figures in question.

And so, after having got my head around who these people were/are, I start to construct my versions – characters with their wants and needs. Then comes imagination and artistic licence, writing as much as I can about what they might have been like.

But to make a play, having an understanding of character is not enough. The conceit of the play imagines – ‘what if these people met in the run up to one of their tragic deaths?’ And so, the fiction begins.

After writing out a plan (or twenty), I start the first draft and... it is rubbish.

It is so stuffed with historical nods and exposition, it feels like a research paper. After some great feedback from the literary manager, I start work on the second draft. Thinking about the emotional tussle in each scene, stripping back to what the character in the scene wants and how they try to get it – it’s like writing for beginners... This is what drives a narrative and makes it electric – not who knew what, or which street existed when, or how a building was used once. Then, perhaps, I worry about whether any of that history and social commentary will relate to anyone today. However, if we’re really putting ourselves into the process and writing with honesty, we cannot but relate to what is happening NOW. The next step is to leave all that research, the themes, the plans, the daunting ambition of the piece alone in my subconscious.

I am in a local library.

But then I remember.

I love ideas.

I love stories.

I love people coming alive on the page.

I can probably have a good go at it.

Time to see those people and events come alive.

Right here in my present imagination.

All I have to do now is write.

Testament

Testament is an acclaimed rapper, playwright and world record holding beatboxer based in West Yorkshire. His work includes the Hip-Hop album *Homecut: No Freedom Without Sacrifice*, spoken word performances for radio and television and the celebrated play *Black Men Walking* (nominated for Best Play at The Writer's Guild Awards 2019 & Best New Play at the UK Theatre Awards 2020). His radio play *The Beatboxer* was nominated for the Imison Award at the BBC Audio Drama Awards 2020.

Testament was Channel 4 writer-in-residence at Royal Exchange Theatre Manchester and his critically acclaimed show *Orpheus In The Record Shop* was broadcast on BBC Television in 2021. Testament's writing has been published in several anthologies and has been used as a teaching resource internationally.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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