

ALL THE ORDINARY ANGELS: Pre-rehearsal interview with Writer Nick Leather

Nick Leather was Playwright-in-Residence at the Royal Exchange in 2004/2005 and is currently under commission from both the Royal Court and BBC Radio. ALL THE ORDINARY ANGELS was the winner of the Pearson Award for Best Play 2004.

How has winning the Royal Exchange Theatre WRITE competition effected your career?

It basically opened the door to let me into the building and I still haven't really left yet! What began with a reading became an attachment, then a residency, and now a production – and throughout that time I've been able to make the journey from being good at writing to being able to write a good stage play. And that might not seem a long way – but it really is! Before I saw the WRITE competition advertised, I'd never thought about writing a play for the stage. And I wouldn't have entered if I hadn't've been inspired by seeing a production of LOOT by Joe Orton at the Exchange just before the competition deadline. If I hadn't've have been one of the winners I'm not sure I would ever have written anything for the stage ever again – but fortunately for me the judges had impeccable taste!

Was ALL THE ORDINARY ANGELS written specifically to be performed in the round?

Absolutely. Lots of people say that they think it must be difficult to write for the round, but it really isn't – it's dead easy. Who wants walls? It's great for making you think, as a writer, about what objects you really need. And, as an audience, I think it makes you focus much more on those objects. Everything's a bit magic in the round. I wrote the final scene of the play whilst sat on the roof of the module, and everything feels quite epic up there!

What made you decide to write a play about ice cream and why is it set in Manchester between 1989 – 1990?

I wanted to write about a family business. And I wanted both the family and the business to be changed by the time in which they live. The 1980s seemed an interesting time business-wise, in terms of the aggressive individualism of the age – and of course the end of the decade was both a really big turning point in World History and Manchester's History. You've got the fall of the Berlin Wall and Communism, as well as the release of Nelson Mandela and the Poll Tax and Strangeway Prison Riots. And it was a moment in popular culture when Manchester was on top of the world. When The Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses both appeared on the same episode of *Top of The Pops*, everybody at the time looked to Manchester for music. If the world was changing, Manchester was both embracing and playing a part in that change.

Are the characters in the play based on people you know?

No, they're not. I've only based a character on somebody I knew once and I've decided that I'll never do it again as every time I've seen the person since I've felt very guilty! Not so much because it was a negative portrayal – it wasn't really the character was quite heroic – but just because I felt like I'd invaded their privacy a bit. Now I just make all my characters up. Honest!

How would you describe Lulu's relationships with the other characters in the play?

Lulu is right at the centre of the play: if it wasn't for her, it's possible that the competition would be resolved happily. For most of the play she plays with the other characters without any real

regard for their feelings or the consequences – that is, of course, until her own feelings become involved. She's had a tough life and I think Giuseppe – who was her local ice cream man when she was a kid – reminds her of the time before her dad left and things then became painful and complicated for her. Lino reminds her of her Dad – he's a genuinely nice person, if lacking in courage and dynamism. Rocco meanwhile is more like her brother – he's edgy, ambitious, dark and a little crazy. To Lulu, Bernie represents the sort of stability that she's never had and has tried desperately to convince herself she never wants. I think Lulu's relationships with the other characters should be like a pinball machine – with her colliding into everybody in turn, and bouncing off them, and onto somebody else, before eventually vanishing down the hole.

Which medium do you prefer writing for?

Novels I think – but then again I haven't written one yet! I honestly don't have a preference for writing for stage, screen or radio. They're all really challenging in different ways. The stage and the radio give the best opportunity to really get an audience to work, and use their imagination – but it's also great to present the audience with a complete world like you can when you're writing for the screen. Either way, I just like to write stories with a strong narrative, and to tell those stories as visually as possible – and hopefully this approach will work in any medium, even if you have to configure it slightly differently each time you write.

Which writers do you admire?

To be honest I admire anyone who's written a play! The novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez is my hero, however. He's not so much a writer, as a soul with a pen. In terms of scriptwriters, I'd say that I particularly admire Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Willy Russell, Jim Cartwright, Richard Bean and Frank Cottrell Boyce. Probably my favourite though is Alan Bleasdale.

What are you currently writing?

A play for the Royal Court Theatre. It's called THE BREAKFAST GIRLS and is about Line Dancing.

How do you hope that your writing career will develop?

Well I've got quite a clear idea of what I'd like to do, but if I go public with it then it might not come true! What I will say is that for years I've had three ambitions in life (in no particular order!): to write a play for the Royal Exchange Theatre; to write for Coronation Street; and to win an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. One down then, two to go!

What advice would you give to anyone who wants to write professionally?

Stick at it. Make sure you learn the rules – defy them all you want once you know what they are, but learn them first. And above all put your heart on the page.