

## An evening with the playwrights: Sir David Hare and Don Watson in conversation

During his illustrious career, playwright, screenwriter and film and theatre director Sir David Hare (*Skylight*, *The Hours*) has examined the machinations of British institutions, deftly crafting stories about modern life that balance the personal with the political. Sir David joined one of Australia's great writers, Don Watson (*The Passion of Private White* and many other titles) for a wide-ranging conversation at State Library Victoria's Conversation Quarter in March 2023, presented in partnership with Adelaide Writers Week.

**Don Watson:** David, you've been in Adelaide – I know because I saw you there – welcome to what used to be called the Athens of the South.

David first went to Adelaide in 1982 and delivered an erudite 50-minute address on the theatre, and then he asked for questions and the first question was, 'Do you know Diana Rigg?'. And David said he did and... I'll let David finish this.

David Hare: Yes, the gentleman then asked if he could have a second question, and the moderator rather nervously allowed him a second question, and his second question was, 'What's she like?'

**DW:** Well, you won't get questions like that in Melbourne.

You've been consistently on the left from go to whoa from back in the 1970s, but it seems to me that your remarkable achievement is to be political

*David Hare and Don Watson in conversation at State Library Victoria. Photograph by James Braund.*



**and yet not compromise dramatic art. Orwell talked about the problem, ‘How can I be a creative writer with a political point to make?’ How have you done that, do you think? I mean, you obviously decided not agitprop. You’re not Brechtian, and so on.**

DH: No, I’ve nothing against agitprop. I like a nice agitprop play; I enjoy it very much. I just can’t write them myself because I can’t help seeing complexity everywhere. Everybody says that I always give the devil the best tunes and I’ve written a lot of devils and I’ve written a lot of people of whom I theoretically don’t approve. I just can’t help it.

**DW: You directed a play of Christopher Hampton’s in the 1970s called *Total Eclipse*, and in his autobiography Simon Callow wrote of the exhilaration he felt after you had nailed a scene and a character that you’d been working on for ages. These are some of the phrases: ‘The pulse beating fast to the brain, working quicker, one starts slavering like an animal hunting, the act of creation with its imperatives, one walks around not as oneself but as oneself plus another.’ If that comes close to describing the thrill of artistic creation, it also describes the collaborative aspect of it.**

DH: That’s what you see in very, very good actors, and Simon is a very, very good actor. If you put him in the right situation, which is your job as the director, then it’s exciting. The other thing that is essential, if you want to be a playwright, is love of interpretation, and I’ve said before that I so often work with the same actors. I’ve worked with Ralph Fiennes a lot, I’ve worked with Bill Nighy a lot, I’ve worked with Judi Dench a lot. And although I know them, and think I know them, and I think I know their work, what is so exciting to me is when I hand them the script, I haven’t got the slightest idea what they’re going to do with it. And they’re going to bring something to it that I don’t know is coming, and that to me is the whole pleasure of being a playwright.

The absolute opposite of a playwright was Samuel Beckett. Samuel Beckett simply made the actors move in exactly the positions that he – he had a notebook in which they were made to make the moves. I don’t know if you had here something called the Arthur Murray School of dancing, but when you learned the tango, you had to put your foot exactly where Arthur Murray had put a foot sign. And Samuel Beckett had famous notebooks in which people were simply made to put their feet down in particular places. It was simply an installation; it was an artwork. It wasn’t what I would call a play because he wanted it to be exactly the same every night.

And the worst thing he did – for which I think nobody should ever forgive him, particularly when he was directing – the worst thing he did was leave on

the train after the dress rehearsal because he was totally uninterested in the reaction of the audience, because that to him was not part of the play. In other words, he'd prepare it and then he'd never even stay to see it in front of the audience, because as far as he was concerned the audience were irrelevant. You were simply creating an artwork, and what people made of it was up to them.

Whereas to me the thing is only fulfilled when the audience arrives, and the first preview is the most exciting night of the year. The night when the audience first hits the play is just, to me, tremendously exciting. And I don't understand playwrights who aren't turned on by that, and who don't look forward with fear to that, and to that moment in which you feel something terribly strongly, and you think, 'I hope this is going to be of interest to you. Is it?' and you will get an answer to that question one way or another.

And you either see the light of recognition in people's faces where they go, 'Ah, thank God somebody's saying something that I have been feeling. I recognise this, but it hasn't yet been articulated. Thank God, somebody said it,' or you will see that unpleasant blank in their face which is, 'I know this man feels terribly strongly, but I haven't the slightest idea why he feels so strongly about this.' And that's when you've written a flop. And I've known plenty of both things.

**DW: Have you ever on an opening night, or seeing the rushes from a film, thought, 'How the hell did the director think that's what I was writing about?'**

DH: Yes. I've seen my work very badly directed. I've only once stopped it. I don't know if you understand this, but the reason a lot of us – Tom Stoppard, me – we've spent our whole lives in the theatre, and when young people ask me, 'What is the difference between theatre writing and film writing?' the answer is not technical, the answer is contractual. If I write a play I own the copyright, and that means I am the ultimate arbiter of everything that happens on the stage. If I am hired to write a film, I sell my work. I'm a labourer, and there are 15 producers who are absolutely convinced that they are better writers than I am, and I have no legal argument against them.

I actually now, when I work on a film, find that I spend ten times as long advocating for my script as I do writing it. I have to enter arguments – what I call the lawyering side of writing. In other words, I really should have trained to be a lawyer because I have endlessly to speak on behalf of my script to people who do not understand it, and I have to defend my writing and I spend far more time defending my writing because ultimately if they want to mess it around, they can mess it around however they want. Because they legally have

just bought me like you buy anybody, it's anybody's labour.

I've known screenwriters who've said that at the end of the process they've earned less than a burger flipper for the number of hours they've actually put in. They would be better off working in McDonald's. You know that, going into a film, whereas when you go into a theatre you have the right to close down the play. If they're messing your play around, you have the right to close it down. It's a right that I've only exercised once, because the production was a travesty of what I'd written. Unfortunately, it was at Epidaurus, so it was rather a dramatic place to close down a play, but I was so enraged by feeling, 'This is not what I wrote,' and that's my right and that's why we all love working in the theatre, because the writer has that power.

**DW: Apparently there's an anecdote of David Chase's – an actor approached him during the shooting of *The Sopranos* and said, 'I don't think my character would say this,' and he said, 'It's not your character, it's mine.'**

DH: We could go into that at some length. It is true that a character only exists in so far as you have invented them, but on the other hand the actor has to feel some sort of right of ownership, and if they don't feel a right of ownership, I'm afraid it appears clearly. You will often see, for instance, in a David Mamet play where David Mamet is very firm about, 'I wrote it, it's mine, you have no role but to say the lines,' there's something missing in the acting of his work, and what's missing is that moment at which the actor is allowed to add something extra, and that's the bit I love.

**DW: I must say as a former speechwriter I do envy you the vehicles for your words. I watched *Plenty* a couple of weeks ago, and there's about three minutes of Ian McKellen being a foreign office heavy, tearing strips off Meryl Streep, and it's unbelievable. Just the fluency and the power of the words; I felt like I was Meryl Streep and I was being torn apart. And that's when I actually thought of speechwriting.**

DH: John Major – and you may say it's a misprint, but it's not – he's a lovely man. He's a very decent and interesting man, and in a room he is extremely charismatic, and everybody wants to talk to him when he's in a room. But he said to Ian McKellen, 'I know I have a problem, which is if I'm in a room with ten people, I'm fine. If I'm in a room with 50 people, I'm still okay. If I'm in a room with 100 people, I lose them, and if I'm in a room with 1000 people, they don't listen to a word I say. What can you do to help me?' And Ian said, 'Well, I don't approve of your politics, I'm not of your party, but I will try and help you to reach 1000 people.' And it was wonderfully generous of Ian, and he went off and gave John Major some lessons. Whether it ever did him any good, I don't know. But it is a completely different technique.

**DW: You know the English have a huge advantage over us because you speak in whole sentences.**

DH: Yes. I first came to Adelaide in 1982 to do a play called *A Map of the World*, and it was produced by the Sydney Theatre Company, but it was presented at Adelaide. And Mel Gibson – who at that point was more or less unknown, I think he'd just done *Gallipoli* – came in to audition for this play, and he looked at the dialogue on the page and he just burst out laughing. And I said, 'Why are you laughing?' and he said, 'Well, you have to understand I've never said anything longer than "pass the salt".'

**DW: Yeah. I could believe that. And he was half American. I mean, you need to go out to Western Queensland to actually hear the real Australian way of speaking. Your COVID monologue, *Beat the Devil*, which Ralph Fiennes has been doing in London – for those who haven't read about it, it's David describing over 40 minutes the horrors of his own two-week affliction with COVID, plus his mounting rage over the incompetence, the near criminal negligence, of the Tory government. I can't write when I'm angry, but do you write when you're angry?**

DH: Yes. I got COVID very early on. I got it as soon as it came to England. It was March the 16th 2020, and so it literally hit our shores about a week before. I got it very badly. And because of that we both went mad together, the government and me, so there was this funny sort of parallel. I was delirious, and I was in a funny situation in which I was totally convinced of various insane things. I was waking up in the morning and when my wife was asking me how I was, I was replying things like, 'One of my bodies is very well, but the other few aren't feeling so well,' and I was convinced that I was four bodies that were all lying together and stuff.

I was, at one level, totally off my head, but then so were the government totally off their head. They were doing things that were completely irrational, which could be guaranteed to give us what we ended up with, which is the highest death rate of any country in Europe. Our preparations were so poor, and the measures we took were so clearly not the public health measures that needed to be taken, and we were sort of the exemplar of how not to do it. And if you're lying there thinking – or rather with your GP telling you – you're going to die or that you may very well die, it's not so great to know there's a reason and the reason is the incompetence of your government.

The personal and the political at that point did become very closely allied, and I think that probably is the reason both for the anger in the monologue and for the impact of the monologue, because in England it had quite an impact.

**DW: It's also funny, I should add.**

DH: Yeah, it is funny. Particularly the sections of my wife were extremely funny.

**DW: Yes. There's a very good line in there...but I won't embarrass Nicole.**

DH: No, no, don't embarrass her. But also, she was the most excellent nurse, but when she realised the state I was in at the end of the thing she was rather less patient with me perhaps.

**DW: I think you might have said somewhere that you're 75 now, and it's disappointing because you're just getting the hang of it. And I must say, I share that sentiment.**

DH: It's a terrible feeling that you've got to stop at just the moment when you think you're beginning to get good at it.

**DW: And you really do feel that?**

DH: I really do feel that. I feel I know so much about playwriting. For goodness' sake, I've done it for over 50 years, I ought to know something by now. Of course, I think I've got better at it, you'd be mad not to think that. We were discussing the other day what the worst thing about death is, and anybody can raise their hand and contradict me please, but my own personal horror of death is the idea that I don't see the story out. That really annoys me. That in 100 years' time we will know what this historical period meant, and what its significance was, and what was important from it, and what wasn't important from it.

I'm reading a book at the moment about the French Revolution of 1848. There's a whole load of people you never heard of. And then there's a bloke called Karl Marx, and Karl Marx is hanging around in Paris in 1848 – nobody's taking any notice of him, nobody's ever heard of him, he doesn't want to meet all the famous people, he doesn't want to meet Lamartine and all these people that you've never heard of today. But he's quietly going on, and we now know how that ends, that story. But it takes a very long time, and unfortunately, I'm not going to be around to find out how this insane story that I've lived through ends – or develops, I should say.

**DW: Of course, Marx thought he knew what the end would be. That was his big mistake.**

DH: Yeah, that was his big mistake. But his analysis of what happened in 1848 was much cleverer than that of the people who were in the middle of it.

*This is an edited transcript of a conversation at State Library Victoria on 7 March 2023. For more great conversations and inspiring programs, visit [slv.vic.gov.au/whats-on](http://slv.vic.gov.au/whats-on)*