

QUESTION: Why use so much music in the play?

GODBER: The music does have a point but it's also there to fill the atmosphere, it's not as if, for example, I've used the first act of *La Boheme* and if anyone doesn't know *La Boheme* then I'm poking fun at them, or anything to do with the relationships on-stage, that the music counterpoints to what's happening - in some cases it does. And obviously I use Puccini a lot because he likes Puccini and Puccini is a love story and about lost love and in many respects this is a play about lost love and about lost people.

What's fascinating for me about this play is that I think it's actually a very serious play and it's also a very funny play and one of the dangers of doing a new play, particularly a new comedy, is that you don't know if it's funny or not, and on the first night I was a nervous wreck - was it going to be funny or bleak or whatever? And for my taste, this evening, it's got a little too funny. I like dark things, dark things don't necessarily put "bums on seats" so it's about getting the balance right really and I think in general the balance is about right but my penchant is for... I am the lugubrious, sardonic devil-figure. I love it when it's menacing and sinister, I also love it when it's full.

QUESTION: But you were laughing, John.

GODBER: I'm laughing at things that perhaps other people aren't laughing at. This is a very personal play. I have had sex with my wife actually, in the last two years, so I'll get that out of the way to start with. In fact we've just come back from Paris and I think we did it several times.

But it is about panic attacks and I have been having panic attacks for three years. I almost lost my life through blood clots and it changed my outlook absolutely and I went to "Champneys" - it cost me a fortune to go there, and that's where the idea for the play came from, me being at "Champneys" convalescing. I was on "Warfarin" for a long time and I've never been anywhere so posh. It frightened me to death, that there were people who could go there for six

months. There was a guy who had been there for six months, and I heard Mr. Weeway - it's not a made up name - who owns Champneys, say "I'm ready for some more money" and the guy said "I'll give you another ten thousand pounds at the week-end," and this was a big, overweight guy from the Far East. And I was in the gym with him, I couldn't train but he was on a bike and I said to him, "Have you lost any weight?" and he said "No" and I said, "How long have you been here?" and he said, "Six months! I love it."

I also wanted to write something, in a sense, about the outside world. I wanted to write about the outside world from the inside because the health farm is in every case an oasis, there are not many rapes at "Champneys," no one gets stalked, in my experience, at "Champneys," or burgled, cars don't get broken into, so I wanted to turn it inside out really. You see, I live in Hull and there's no crime in Hull or anything like that, it's like living on an island, you know, it's a beautiful idyll.

I think, quite seriously, I think what happens is you forget when you're laughing at things how serious the things are, how serious the comment is and I think, to quote Alan Ayckbourn, there was a thing in *The Guardian* saying am I becoming Alan Ayckbourn? And I've got to know him quite well, perhaps I'm turning into his younger son, or his elder son, as it happens. Alan commented once that people come out of his plays saying, "Well if I'd known what I was laughing at at the time, I wouldn't have laughed at it."

And I think there is something of that in this particular piece, I think there's something of that in life, I personally dislike comedies that are only funny or just funny - I can't handle it. You've got to have the Ying and the Yang, you've got to have the dark, you've got to have the black side in order for the comedy to work.

QUESTION: I've been to dance classes and exercise classes and it is so familiar, what you have depicted is so right - that one is laughing at that because of one's own experience.

GODBER: Yeah, I think that's true, I think that's a starting block and the structure of the play starts with slapstick, the step class, but what I try to do with the structure of the play, it's a little bit like a boxing match: first scene - lots of punches to the kidneys, softening up around the lower regions, you know what I mean, a few good upper-cuts, just to soften up the audience to get 'em laughing, because if you can get 'em laughing then it comes as a bit of a slap in the face (CLAPS HANDS) when something else happens, and I think that's what I'm pleased about.

If the work is developing in any direction, it's to do with the structure of the journey that the audience go on. Some of my plays, which I wrote very quickly, *Bouncers*, for example, which has not been on here, the audience laugh themselves out and after half an hour you can feel the audience saying, "I cannot possibly laugh anymore, I've laughed too much," and now as I'm getting older I'm not doing "Running-about" plays so much, I'm doing "Sitting-down" plays, the oscillation of the humour and the way that I let the audience come into it, I think I'm getting a little bit more sophisticated; I hope I'm getting more sophisticated.

It's like skiing, one of the books that had a big influence on me was Albert Camus' *The Outsider*, because I thought that was my life. I failed my "Eleven-Plus," I'm seventeen stone, I'm six foot three, and it's like, you're always the outsider, you're always looking, you know, even when I'm in it, I'm outside it. Things like skiing, I went skiing and I put these big long skis on and a donkey could have skied better than me, and I went to some step classes and, you know, I like to dance, but step classes were beyond me. I like the situation when you take the individual and plonk him somewhere where it's not absolutely extraordinarily different but it's different enough for him to be just off-guard.

There's also a class thing in this as well, there's a comedy line when he says: "This is what the Thatcher years have done." I think there

are hundreds of thousands of people who wanted to be something else and ended up being something else and you think, perhaps there's no going back,

QUESTION: I have been to Champneys a couple of times and I think it is very true what you have depicted here. I met an old lady who used to travel from Manchester for many, many years, just to relax, just to spend her money, of course she said she was self-made and all that and then, the kind of counseling that goes on amongst the guests there when they sit together and advise this and advise that is also very, very typical, very true to life that I saw in "Champneys."

GODBER: In the play, the old lady is based on a woman I met at "Ragdale Hall," about six weeks before I wrote the play, because I wrote the play the play very late, in fact I cast the play before I wrote the play. I just phoned six people and said I'm writing a play called *Gym and Tonic*, I think it's going to be about this, do you want to be in it? They all foolishly said yes. At the read-through, nobody had seen the play, we were all sat round nervously, first of all to see if anyone laughed, and they did and then to see if the story hung together, and it didn't, because I had all kinds of endings to the play.

When I first did it and the notion was originally that Don left, that he just turned his back and he left. That to me was the easy option, I think leaving is easy. We talk a lot about suicide, you talk about bleak, I've had two close friends kill themselves, now in a way I think that takes a lot of guts but it also takes a lot of guts not to kill yourself. It takes a lot of guts to run away, it takes a lot of guts to live everyday, and that's what I think I was trying to communicate in a way

QUESTION: What if Don had left?

GODBER: I think if he had of left it would have been too easy, frankly, I think it would have been a bit too "pat." There are a number of plays where people hit crisis points and they leave; I think it's a bit difficult to do that in a comedy. We worked quite hard on where he was at the end, psychologically. Buying a caravan seemed to be the

best place, but it's also symbolic, it's a return to the womb, buying a caravan, it's another island. It's extraordinary, what you expect of a comedy is for it to be funny, and if it's anything else it's a bonus, I think, and I think there are certain images and themes and metaphors that hang together.

QUESTION: Do you think you are seen as a comedy writer?

GODBER: Yeah, I think so, I'm known mostly for comedy, simply because they're the plays that have been to London and won awards for writing plays about working-class life or sport. I've written about five plays about mining, you know, I'm from a mining background, mining's not particularly sexy and if you want to close a theatre, put on a play about mining, especially if it's not in a mining town, but no, it's something that I try to do to broaden the canvas.

QUESTION: Do you think you could have written the same plot as easily twenty years ago?

GODBER: I don't know, twenty years ago I was drunk in a college bar, I was really referring to events, the last twenty years have seen the reign of Margaret Thatcher. I would have to say probably not. I've written a number of plays which haven't been seen outside Hull which follow the same kind of theme; disillusion with politics and politicians and a kind of wanting to escape from society in a way. I have this knee-jerk reaction now, every-time there's another murder or whatever, the third eye shutter comes down and I get de-sensitized to it. In my experience of these health farms, and I've been to one or two, because I quite like them, they are wonderful places to pamper yourself and to de-stress and to feel wonderful, and an hour later on the motorway back up to Hull you want to stab somebody and you want to go back to the health farm.

What I think I was trying to communicate in the play was, there's a lot of buzz-words, stress is a buzz-word, I think, "Oh, I'm stressed," While we were rehearsing there was an article which said more people now phone up the "Samaritans" than ever before saying they're stressed. Thirteen million pounds a year is lost through

stress-related illness and all the rest of it and stress seems to me to be one of those things that the more you talk about it the more you're actually opening yourself up to be aware of it.

I had never had a panic attack, never even been ill, and suddenly I have this funny do, my blood thickens and all the rest of it, I'm on 'Warfarin' and I'm having a panic attack now once a month, and I think it's because I'm aware and I can feel myself thinking, "Oh. I think my blood pressure's rising" It's like being a hypochondriac, you become more and more aware of how your body's functioning, and five years ago I'd have said, pass me another Mars Bar and I'll have a pint of Guinness and some Pork Scratchings and now I've got a glass of red wine.

QUESTION: I've often found walking to be as therapeutic as a visit to a health farm.

GODBER: That's what Alan Ayckbourn does, that's fine for him, you know, I like going to these health farms, especially the massage.

QUESTION: Do you think you have a morbid fear of growing old and the prospect of your own mortality?

GODBER: That's good. I was forty in May, and I had a massive crisis. Both my parents are, well they're not ill, but they're not well, they've both got heart problems. In fact, earlier this year, my mother was in hospital on a cardiac ward once a week for about nine weeks, and, as I wrote about in the play, they thought she'd got angina and they prescribed her the wrong tablets and she was going blind she actually couldn't see the television. This is not knocking the National Health, she needed an angiogram and they couldn't afford to give her an angiogram, so I said, against all my principles, bugger it, let's have an angiogram, and the angiogram said there's nothing wrong with your heart, you've got indigestion. The point is how many other people couldn't afford to pay for an angiogram and are on these tablets for angina and are going blind because they swell all the capillaries in your brain and all the rest of it.

But yeah, it is a fear of getting old, I kind of fear that. I've got a young daughter, in fact she's two next Tuesday and we had children I think a bit too late and I'm starting to think, "Oh yeah, when she's twelve I'll be fifty two" and all that kind of thing and perhaps I'll not be first in the egg and spoon race.

QUESTION: When you said that it was too funny was that because of the way this particular audience reacted or was it because of the way it was presented?

GODBER: A little bit of both, I think what happens is its like having the control switch, my own, as I say, sadistic notion is once you've got the audience in and they're laughing early on then to really batter them around the face in the second act, but you can't control an audience to that extent. Once they're laughing and they want to laugh they'll just go

QUESTION: But isn't that the beauty of it, if you take anything popular on television, something like "Only Fools and Horses" it's the contrast between the comedy and the poignancy.

GODBER: I think the reason you write more plays is because you're never satisfied with the play that you've just written and you think, well yes, I think that worked really well but in the next one I can really develop something else, that's the only reason you write another play, that's to write a better one.

QUESTION: Is that the reason that you re-write a lot of your plays, John?

GODBER: Yes. Some of the stuff that I've written early on I didn't think was very good so I re-wrote it.

QUESTION: Was that to get this, that Zing Zang thing (sic)?

GODBER: No, some of it was it was just a bit shoddy work to be honest, I mean bear in mind I didn't expect to be writing plays, I thought - leave teaching and write a few plays and then perhaps be a lecturer then perhaps with a bit of luck I might write a few episodes of *Brookside* - I never expected to be performed quite in the way that I am so a lot of the plays I wrote very quickly, three days, you know, *Up'n'Under* - four days, On St. Mary's lighthouse, *Bouncers* three days, three free periods in school I wrote *Bouncers* in, *Teechers* I wrote in Rome in four days, it was the most performed play in the English language last year, I think.

I think about them a lot, bear in mind Brecht wrote *Threepenny Opera* I think in twelve days, Alan Ayckbourn writes a play very quickly, but what I do now, I've got a computer now so that's useful, now I know how to shift and all that whereas before I couldn't be asked, when it was on the typewriter I just used to type it and I'd think "Oh, I'm not changing it, I haven't got any "Tippex" left" but now you get more serious about the work and it becomes more important to you.

QUESTION: How satisfied are you with the script of this at the moment?

GODBER: Ninety percent satisfied. I think there are a number of gray areas, dead areas that I think we could live without, but there comes a point when you've just got to leave it and you've just got to think, oh I don't know shall I leave it, two people laughed at that, I'll leave it. I understand that when Neil Simon puts a new play on he follows it around for a long, long time re-tuning it, as it goes on. that's what's wonderful about live theatre. You look at it and say you know, "A bit more blue, a bit more green, a bit more this, a bit more that - oh that's it," then you put that in front of another audience and suddenly you think "Oh we've lost it."

QUESTION: What would be your perfect audience?

GODBER: I don't think there is an ideal performance climate, that's what's so fascinating about theatre, you go in there one night and you see it and you think yes, wonderful, they understood the nuance, all the

rest of it and you go in the next night and everyone's come for a bloody good night out, they've come for a laugh, they don't want the dark side of it and if they do identify the dark side they actually just put it to one side.

But I think what happens with a comedy is that it's a little bit like a bridge, if all the structures aren't in place - all the dark structures, the characterizations, the different musicality, the different framing, then somehow the audience don't feel as satisfied, they may not get it at the time, but if it's not there they'll miss it, so what I try to do is to fill the work in a Chekavian sense, I suppose, make the work very busy, the ideas very, very busy, the themes quite large, as the lady said and I think you're absolutely right, the theme about getting old, the theme about being at a health farm.

You know one of the original ideas that we had for Marcia's character, she was completely blind, yet she was still at this health farm in a kind of absurd notion of hanging on to youth because she'd got the money and also the lunacy of simply going to try and find themselves and then getting more and more and more stressed out, all those themes are there and others, but if an audience comes and wants to come in and have a real good laugh then that's absolutely wonderful, it's what they take away afterwards I think that you never know.

QUESTION: Marcia is a terribly Greek character, isn't she?

GODBER: Yes, a seer in a sense and that's why I wanted her to be blind, but I also wanted her to be a little bit like Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*. She's actually based on Michael Winner. I ran into Michael Winner two years ago when he bought the film rights to *On the Piste*, in fact some of the lines that she comes out with are directly from Michael's lips. Larger than life character, who is like quick-silver, thinks one thing and then says something else, ever-changing, but nevertheless fascinating to listen to whether you agree or disagree with what he has to say.

QUESTION: Are you afraid of being typecast?

GODBER: Not particularly, I spent a long time studying drama - a writer who wasn't particularly funny at all, my own penchant is for German Expressionism, but I wouldn't want to make anybody watch it, it is the most tedious, theatre-closing stuff imaginable. I think if you can get people to laugh and there be something said as well it's the best way to sweeten the pill.

I've thought about this a lot, I've thought about the kind of stuff that goes on at the Royal Court, for example. Why aren't I writing plays that would go on at the Royal Court? Well there's a number of reasons, one is because I want my work to be done a lot, for financial reasons, because it is my living, you know, I don't have any other means of keeping the electric on.

Secondly, I don't want to shut theatres, I want to keep as many people coming to the theater as possible. My original remit when I first went to Hull which is some thirteen years ago now, whatever it is, twelve years ago, was to try and attract people into the theatre who had never been into the theatre and you can't do that with *Woyseck*, you can't do that with Oskar Kokoschka's work, you have to have something that hits them fair and square.

And I think, over the last twelve years, I've done as much as anybody in British theatre to try and break down or de-mystify the barriers between those who go to the theatre and those who don't, but there comes a point where I'm aware now that the theatre won't be full of miners, there are no pits anyway, it won't be full of bricklayers or people who work at the dole office, because the whole shift of theatre is against encouraging them en masse to go to the theatre. Now, that was my initial kind of purge, motivation, to get people from my sort of background, a working-class, mining background to go to the theatre.

But there comes a point when you have to express what you feel yourself, and I can only think that if I'm writing about stress, and a lot of people are coming to see it then a lot of people are interested

in stress, and if in some way people have come to see a play about stress, and they say “Well, we’ve had a laugh and it’s taken me out of myself for two hours,” then it ought to be on the National Health. There ought to be a lot more people being able to see it.

I’m very keen on the de-mystification of what theatre is but this is a conversation that will go on and on and on, because it’s about education and its about drama in schools and its about all the things that I believed in when I was teaching nineteen years ago. I was going to write a play about pornography, and I still may, but it may well be funny and that would be interesting.

I don’t know whether anybody would like to adjourn to the bar, I certainly would and if anybody would like to ask me anything else on a more one-to-one or informal basis. Fancy that?

CHAIR: Does sound like a very good idea. As John says, he’s been in Paris, he’s been in Cardiff, he’s been in Nottingham, he’s been all over the place the last two or three days and he’s off to Hull shortly so I’d like to thank him very much indeed on your behalf and on behalf the Derby Playhouse for coming and talking to us tonight. Thank you.

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