



Most Treasured Moments as a Writer

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A WRITER FRIEND IMPRESSES on me how we must celebrate any instance of success about our work, however small. So, beyond the obvious ‘yippee!’ of a broadcast or publication, I welcome the chance to share some moments that gave a real buzz.

Two such moments involve the radio play I wrote about Van Gogh. One happened in a bedroom in Sheepwash in Devon. I had soaked up biographies, Vincent’s letters, and even visited Arles and the asylum at Saint Remy. But I struggled to write the actual script, suddenly doubting my right to portray the man. I looked again at a painting he’d made through the bars of his bedroom window at the asylum; a yellow field in which the reaper is barely discernible. I’d worked out that he’d painted this shortly before an attack of illness that caused the director to deprive him of his paints. The injustice of this spurred me on and I began to write an inner voice — and it came to me in a rush. That opening speech was the key to my Vincent, and it unlocked the play for me.

Another thrilling moment was the recording of the play — notably the casting of Pete Postlethwaite as Vincent. His voice expressed all of Vincent’s passion, obstinance, delight, anger and fervour. His Lancashire accent was *perfect* for the part — Vincent was a northerner in the heat of the south of France. A mesmerising performance.

At the age of fifteen I was given the option of writing dialogue for English homework. I’d been reading Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*



which influenced my ten-page exchange between a mother and son — the longest piece of homework I'd ever written. The teacher gave plenty of encouragement and the highest mark possible, yet also seemed to find plenty of fault. It was the compliment of careful critique, good preparation for future script editing meetings, and gave me such a kick.

A few years ago I went to Berlin for the first time to research a play. My son, in his early twenties, came too. We visited the former headquarters of the Stasi, the cells and interrogation rooms of Hohenschönhausen, Karl-Marx-Allee and a remaining section of the Wall. When I had completed a draft of the play, my son read it. He was gripped and moved by it and told me I'd got the world just right. Of course he was biased but it felt like we were a pair of explorers who have returned from an expedition and we were sharing the excitement at our findings.

An email from a stranger proved not to be a worrying intrusion. She was asking how she might hear again a radio play of mine that she'd heard some twenty years earlier while driving north. She'd always remembered it and now wanted her husband to hear it. It was more than cheering to hear that my play had remained in her head all that time. Yes, emails like that are *always* welcome, thank you.