

Open Q & A with Paul Abbott
Cornerhouse Cinema, Manchester – Tuesday 9th October 2007

Chair: Kate Rowland BBC Creative Director New Writing.

KR: Paul Abbott is not only one of the most original voices working in British Television Drama today, he's also a great champion of new writing talent, something BBC writersroom is also passionate about. Paul is also distinctive in that he breaks boundaries, he thinks about how he can tell a story, how he connects with the audiences, bringing something to the screen that is new and fresh, creating the kind of drama we want to hear and see. Paul is currently working on the film version of *State of Play*, and is writing a new series about Lancashire witches and of course there is series 6 of *Shameless*!

What made you start writing?

Paul Abbott: Well the truth is, from about the age of five, I always wanted to be a doctor. I didn't plan to be a writer, I didn't want to be a writer and it was the furthest, most remote, most embarrassing career option that anyone from my background could pick. I wanted to be a doctor, I had an obsession with doing cataracts in Africa and I set my sights on that without any realistic appraisal that my qualifications would never get me there. The first my family knew about my writing was when they saw a picture of me in the paper with a trophy and a cheque. Of course they blanked the trophy and said 'where you going to get that cashed?' It was a really weird epiphany. I was fifteen and it all kind of happened behind my back, partly I think because we were a big turbulent family and I was way down at the bottom, being in the youngest two. I chose to write as a means of not being contradicted. If I wrote things down on paper, I could say things the way I wanted to. It became a real powerful thing to be able to express myself carefully. I had to, it wasn't a choice.

KR: Did you know then this was what you were going to do full time?

PA: I didn't even want to then. Because it was too embarrassing for words, but actually before anyone found out I was doing it, I had done quite a lot. So, I had already trained myself up. I've no idea why that happened and I've no conscious recollection of the stages of that.

KR: And that need to write, is that still the same now? Even with all your other responsibilities?

PA: No, but even running a company, being a mentor, being an executive on other people's work, if I don't write, I just pop! You know, it's like a rupture. You write to get it out and there's a valve, if you don't turn it off the boiler blows! You have to and it's a daily thing.

KR: So would you say to writers starting out, just do it?

PA: Yes, but do ten times more than you think you ought to. It's not like any other job when you learn in incremental stages, there are no boxes to tick. You're sharpening your own voice and to sharpen your own voice, you've got to see it coming back. Anything you write, a week later, if you think its good that's crap! Because a week later you are a different person, you will have slept on what you have written and when it comes back you read it again, you're meant to be embarrassed about it and this is where most writers stop writing and go 'oh fuck,' but if you don't go 'oh fuck' now, what have you learnt in a week? Re-writing makes you write better.

KR: At what point would you show someone else your work?

PA: I think now I've learnt not to do the first draft on paper, I do the first draft in my head and spin it round. The minute you put something out there that might not be ready, somebody else might like it. You've got to be really careful, to make sure that's the best you can give, the best you can despatch at that point in your life and you can't do that the day after you have delivered it. You've got to read it. It's the best thing you can do. Lock it away and give someone else the key so you can't read it for a week, because when you read it in a week's time you'll deliver it to the people who are paying for it three times better. A big problem with new writing is that you are so pleased to have finished a script that you send it out. The minute you put it out, you're automatically changing the grammar of the way that people speak to you because you could have improved it.

KR: When you started out you did some radio dramas and then you went onto work on *Coronation Street* for quite a while. You are very big on the importance of maintaining your original voice and you have said you stayed on *Coronation Street* for too long. At times soap writing can be the best writing in the world, connecting with an audience in a way that nothing else can and at other times it can be challenging for a writer to be in that situation?

PA: Well, it teaches you a lot. But, it does not teach you to write well. Your voice is minimised to a few millimetres, between one episode of *Coronation Street* to the next, you're supposed to export a DNA that's yours and in a soap you have to belong to a lot of people and I think that's fine, because you earn money for that. All writers want to learn how to make money, becoming a professional writer is about making money. Except, that is the most toxic principle of it, because you earn money and whilst I was working on *Coronation Street* I would say 'oh no the car's broken down, I'll do another episode and then I can afford to buy another car'. No script should be done for that reason. Soaps are allowing that to happen, because their frequency is so minute and that doesn't make it corrupting, it's just if you are not attending to your own work at the same time you are doing that to yourself. I remember realising that I was going down the wrong avenue and I started writing radio plays again and stage plays for the first time and this scared me shitless.

KR : You felt exposed?

PA: Yeah, it is exposing and that's your job. I think that's a really corrupting thing to know that you can get something made. I can virtually get anyone to buy what I suggest now, at this moment, and that's as corrupting as not selling anything.

KR: But, was it also good for you as a writer, in terms of learning craft?

PA: Well, we worked ten hours a day thinking about the show and I think that I am one of the best storyline writers as a result of doing that. But, actually that's not a boast because I'm embarrassed that I did it for four years too long and I should have been attending my own work. I could have written *Shameless*, maybe. I created *Children's Ward* in 1988, I suspect I was capable of writing *Shameless* then, instead it was in 2000.

KR: So, why did it take that long?

PA: Well, because I'd learnt how to earn money before I'd learnt how to move forward. I know there's a buffer zone between that, if you force yourself to make improvements, that won't happen. You've got to jump off a cliff to a place where you don't know you're going to land. That makes the best scripts, not knowing 'god I can knock it off', 'god, how good am I now?'. Even with *Shameless*, I start *Shameless* now, I'm terrified and going 'oh my god I created it, what if I can't do this one'. But, you're meant to think like that, that's not pathological.

KR: So how do you keep it fresh, because you're about to embark on series six? You're storylining, but you're not writing.

PA: Well it depends. Sometimes I write and it's only if I've got the time, but I love it! It's one of the things I know, but still even though it's six series in, we can make it better. We can make it wittier than it is and if it can be improved I want in, even though I should be absolutely exhausted by it as it's been eight years for me, because I

was writing it two years before it hit broadcast. But, I don't mind, because I have got more ideas for *Shameless* than I've ever had, because I get scared of it. It's a real dignified thing to be scared of what you are about to write because it's an important job and you get paid a lot of money. If you swagger and go in there behaving like a typist who can knock one out, you are screwed.

KR: So, because *Shameless* is something I think we know is very personal and is very true to you and then it changes and is heightened. What do you look for in the writers that come to work on the series?

PA: I spent a year in its preparation to transmission finding out what it wasn't. If you can assertively say what it's not, you have to find out what it is. My strapline for the commissioners was 'Walton's on acid' and they loved that, because it fitted their paragraph clause of a description of something that was going to be tilted, subversive and all that, and that's not what I meant. I meant quite a lot more than that, but that satisfied them. You look for writers who show you something you haven't seen yet. For the writers who come in with *Shameless*, it's always a bit of a blag, a caper, or a scam and they think that's what it's about. But, actually it's about diligently written social drama, traded off through this pantomime frequency - that's the only way you can sell it to them. Nobody wants to watch a council estate crumbling, but you don't have to make it look like its crumbling, you can make it look like you can rebuild it. So, you can give the audience a sense of optimism about the way it could go and, as the kids are all brighter than the adults, presumably then, *their* kids will be one step up. You know, that Margaret Reed thing about your kids can be two and a half times what you are or two and a half times less. I've always seen the *Shameless* thing as about watching the kids grow into higher organisms than their parents and that gives it a sense of optimism. It's a real buried impression of *Shameless*, but that is why it works.

KR: *Shameless* is described as comedy drama, a really difficult form to get right. With *State of Play* did you think political thriller? Do you think about genre when you are writing, because in the industry a lot of people talk about genre?

PA: No, but I've been writing for thirty years and every time anybody asks 'what genre is it?', I say what are you talking about...? I don't know what that stuff is and you don't have to because they are suggesting that you are going to be one of seven pairs of jeans and then you go, now I want one I haven't seen yet. I think the most satisfying thing is that you'd have to be childishly petulant about going 'I want to make something that I haven't watched before' - *you have to write stuff that you want to watch*, if you're not going to watch it, don't send it in.

KR: You worked as a Producer on *Cracker* and you now have your own company, how important is it for writers to kind of understand both the business and the craft of the industry, as much as just thinking about what they want to write, what they want to say?

PA: I had been thrust from working on *Coronation Street* and *Children's Ward* to producing *Cracker* and actually the expenditure of money and the finances is the same thing on a higher scale. But, it's actually learning what you can do with that money if you make judicious creative choices. I used to really panic when somebody said 'oh god that's really well directed', I used to say 'I don't know how you know', I just couldn't see it. But, now I can see something was well directed, well performed, well written and well produced. You can tell, you can smell, when something is well produced and that means you've spent the money appropriately, you haven't just shown off with cranes flying about everywhere and big name actors. You've learnt how to calibrate that kind of stuff for talent, not showing off.

KR: One of the things that's said at the moment is "fewer, bigger, better", for example the American model of the big long-running series...How much do you think that British Drama is its own being?

PA: You've just said it! We haven't done a big long series yet, we've been talking about it for twenty years and every time a channel runs out of money, they reduce it saying that they're just going to do two, three, four part series...but they promised us twenty part series, twenty years ago. You have to force them to look at how that can be done before they will engage with paying for it and that's kind of where I am at, at the moment. I get really

frustrated that the Americans can do it. John Wells, of *West Wing* and *ER*, has bought *Shameless* and is re-making it as an American, cultural frequency and they can do it, because they've always done it. I don't know why we can't. I think it's because our writing pool and our directing and producing pool is so minimised compared to theirs, they can find twenty writers to sit around one table. The minute you've got a list of top writers through, I could name four out of six who'd be the same people I was given back in 1994 when I was producing *Cracker*. Nobody is looking for new writers or new talent and if you don't it affects you and it really damages you, because you can't think of spreading out.

I want to create a twenty part series that is as good at episode twenty as it is at episode one, so you're not just lying to the audience. I don't mean the *Holbys*, *The Bill*, they fulfil a kind of telly need, a production need and the audience are really satisfied with that. But, I'm not talking about that, I always get really confused by the fact that *Heartbeat* can get 11.2 million! *Shameless* would never have got on air if we hadn't kind of invented a latitude for pantomime within it, because people love that. They love Frank...but what do they mean that they love Frank? He batters his kids, takes their money, spends it on drugs - and my wife's Auntie, who's very posh, loves him...she loves a chirpy drunk. You render him charming, because the kids can't be harmed by him because they've got more intelligence than to let him in; and you've got to broker stuff that way. That's how the world is, you've got to train people to look at the stuff they don't want to. You know, like the social level drama in *Shameless*, all the kids are adults and all the adults are kids, which is funny. But, they're not meant to want to be adults so it kind of speaks for itself, that they've had a turbulence of historical abuse...in a funny way!

Question from the floor: When a new writer gets a trial script, what can you give to a trial script that's going to give them something that they haven't already got?

PA: Somewhere like *Shameless*?

Q: Well *Shameless* or anything like it...

PA: I was twenty-two when I was interviewed for *Coronation Street*. You know when you saw the cabinet ministers in *Spitting Image*? It looked like that when I first walked in. The writers were all really talented and actually in their heads they were about twelve, but they didn't like new writers and I had three earrings that I was asked to take out and wear a tie and get my hair dyed, because I'd dyed it green for a party...as a Christmas tree and I couldn't get it out! So, they wouldn't actually let me have the job until I was conservative. They turned me down from the job, because they thought I was just too young and they offered me a trial script and I swear I thought... fuck you, I'm going to wipe the smile off your face and I'm going to write a script you can't turn down, and I did. I worked on it for three times longer than I ought to, really obsessively going 'go on then, turn me down'. That's what you have to do, you can't just make one look like the last one you saw. You've got to speak for yourself. It's about writing that script that comes through the door and makes you say "I've never heard anybody talk like this." It's just being confident enough to be honest about your own, not opinions, but philosophy and prospect and definitions. People will use words and you read them and you go, 'they don't mean that word'. They mean they heard that on *The Bill* last week and it's one of those words that telly tends to like, even down to the names of characters sometimes. No one would be called Linda and Jim, I know people are, but they've got that from telly because it's inoffensive. You know you could call them Greta and Felix, I've never seen those. You've got to carve your own niche and be absolutely confident that the minute you start to do that it will go better than worse.

Q: Do you think that's really encouraged in the industry though to carve your own niche, to be individual?

PA: No, only I would tell you that. You're not paid to offer the audience what they want, you're paid a lot of money to take the audience somewhere they didn't know they wanted to go. For instance *Cracker* got through by accident, it was accidentally commissioned as was *Band of Gold* and *Prime Suspect*; because it was at a time when the editorial commissioners at ITV were between flexi-pool and an appointed network commissioner. By the time the network commissioner was appointed, they went 'oh I'm not having these' but they'd already been made.

About a year later they were saying how brave they'd been to commission them! However if they'd said they would never have commissioned them, they would have helped us all in knowing how to frame our grammar, to pitch to commissioners. You tell them what it's not, before you tell them what it tries to be, you only have to speak like nobody else and I don't mean abstractly or cryptically.

KR: Your writing voice is only judged, I would say, in terms of the originality of who you are. Not on the fact that you can write one like someone else or trial scripts i.e. here's a sort of *EastEnders*. It's about you and what you've got to say as Paul said.

PA: Well, one of the writers who is sitting in the audience I have mentored for 2 and half years. The whole thing about mentoring is it isn't about teaching someone how to write, you can't do that. Too many people think they can write, with you having to write it for them. That hard bit is actually getting out of your spleen and finding out where you find stuff that you believe in to talk about, and it doesn't matter what that is or what philosophy that contains. The minute you do that, the minute you speak for yourself in all earnestness, I swear that you can't not find work. The writer in the audience has got a script he's written, which two people I know don't want to make but they've offered him an open commission on two projects and I've never heard of that in my life. This script is written to the highest of his ability and you can't take that away from him. You want to write for stuff you want to do. That's all you have to do and one writer I'm working with has a project that he wrote seven years ago that hasn't been made yet. He earns a lot of money and it doesn't matter that the project didn't get made because it got him the work and that about him speaking with his own voice. He didn't write a script for *Doctors* or *The Bill* or *Holby* and a lot of courses teach people to do that. You should be encouraged to write with your own voice first, because your voice will get you all the *Doctors* scripts in the world, all the *Cracker* scripts, or your own series, that's what happens. If you aim at the highest drawer you could get to at the time you are writing your script, you can't not get work.

Q: Do you think you can teach someone structure or do you think you have to have the basic knowledge yourself?

PA: There are so many technical things that have to be taught. The only thing you can't teach anybody is how to speak. That's like making somebody white be black, unless they have a pigmentation gene, they're not going to do it. You can't fake it and whoever said you could fake it in the first place should be taken out and shot, you don't have to. The minute you start talking to yourself properly and it is that, it's a psychological rectitude that you apply, you ask yourself questions in scripts that you can't answer. You don't have to answer them in the script, but if you're talking to yourself and you're exposing yourself, you are donating organs in every script and that's exhausting. The more you do that and the more you put yourself into something, the more it rumbles and it comes back with twice the power. You don't lose anything you just gain and people are so busy trying to look like the last person who spoke. Telly speaks on a low grammar and you don't have to do that and that doesn't mean you've got to be posh or intellectual, you know if you're intellectually driven, you've got to write scripts that are pointedly not because you can't speak to the audience like they're twats! It's your job to paint the bus that they want to get on and honestly, it's much easier than people think and they've got to stop thinking that talent belongs to somebody else.

Q: You spoke very movingly on *Desert Island Discs* about suffering from your depression, how do you manage to still motivate yourself to write when you're feeling that low?

PA: Well, because I'm bi-polar. I've got to stop motivating myself to buy the BBC! Because that's where you get to, you go so high and so low and I was trying to say that earlier in a way. Actually, I think it's the best treatment I've ever had. I didn't want to be a writer and it became a compulsive, imperative, mechanism to make me speak for myself before I popped and ruptured. I really didn't want to do it and it's still the most embarrassing thing that you could tell my family...that I'm a writer. Not the writer that I am now, because it was like saying I wanted to become a typist and too many people become typists using the word writer. But, in my family it's still a bit embarrassing because I can't fix a car that's not mine or theirs.

Q : How do you find your new writers?

PA : Well I couldn't answer the second one because I've never known how that happens and you know, they're personal and it's me. I teach at Universities, I mentor for students, I'm a writer, I run a company and you're a brand above all that whether you like it or not and that's really hard to find writers. You can't subscribe to wanting a school of writers, but somehow there's always one more each three months that kind of gets through and I love that. What I'm trying to do is to find, to foster, a kind of generosity in other writers, where four writers mentor one student. Honestly, we need about seventy percent more writers than we've got in this country, because it's getting boring now and the ones who wrote really well are still writing way they wrote twenty years ago and that's just crap. They've a grammar that was lucrative and so they clung onto it, but that's nearly twenty years ago. I keep seeing that all the time and it's rubbish and they're all people I know write ten times better than that...they've been taught how to earn money.

Q: What do you think about the BBC Writers Academy, with a view to the writer retaining their unique voice, when they are going through what is essentially, a production line?

KR: I wouldn't say it was a production line.

PA: Yes it is.

KR: It's writing to understand shows. But, the writers that are selected are incredibly original writers.

PA: But, they're taught how to write certain programmes aren't they?

KR: They're taught to understand the format of certain shows, but what they are looking for are the most original writers in the first instance and then....

PA: Then they hammer them into shape for *Holby*, *Doctors*...

KR: The idea being that those writers, because they are next generation, will change those. So they've got some young writers changing those....

PA: My only criticism with that is that they are not being taught to actually do this, they are being taught to earn money and that will service us. To service you, we will help you find your voice and even if you don't have to pay for that, you can't pass it on...it's not a monocle, but you can show people how to find what they are on about and that's really important. It's more important for writers who work on long-running series and soaps to commit themselves and a third of their year to write stage plays, radio plays and movies, whether they are getting produced or not. Honestly, that's the only way to measure where you are, away from the wager and inversion of you, because it does contaminate you. I loved working on *Coronation Street* because I got lucky really early, but it wasn't lucky because I worked so hard doing the job they paid me for and being really diligent and having probity about the way I conducted myself. But, actually I stole too much from me and I stopped thinking about how much money it was and I thought I can't leave, but you have to leave and when I did, I forgot to tell my wife that I took a seventy-five percent pay drop to produce *Cracker* and we'd just had a baby and got a new house!

Q: How important is it to you to have some sort of point or philosophy to your script, or are you happy if you think you've got a story that's interesting and entertaining to an audience, then that's good enough?

PA: Yeah, but if all you're writing is the story then it's pointless writing it because you can tell a story on the back of a Bazooka Joe chewing gum, but you've got to know why you want to write. Your voice has to be as essential as the contributory factor. If you thought you could give that to another writer to write it the way you did, you haven't got anything and a lot of television buys stories in that way, so I'm not talking about what we're seeing now, I'm saying it's more or less spiritual for a writer, you have to go 'oh my god I know what I'm doing with this'.

It's like the Lancashire witch trials project and why I wanted to do it. I hate research, I hate real life imposing on my ability to tell a story and you go 'well what if it doesn't have to' and you fix that. I could tell a story about the Pendlebury witches, but I'm not writing a bloody archive for anybody who wants to get an accurate thing for the Discovery channel. I want to make it into *The Crucible* meets *Shameless* and find a community that you pine for when they're gone whether they are witches or not. You have to need to add that little ingredient and it doesn't have to be messy, but it has to be yours and that sounds slightly mystical and it's not. You just find a position where you go 'I know I can write this better than anyone else, or this version unlike anybody else.' That's all you have to train yourself to do. You have to keep telling yourself that otherwise you're just typing...that sounds slightly offensive the more I say that. You can have a well written script for a document covering archive recorded material, you can. But, I don't know why you would want to.

KR: I think what Paul just said then about the community, creating a community that the audience live with is one of the most important things that any dramatist does.

Q: What do you think of actors?

PA: I love them! I don't understand it and I could never do it, I totally admire what they can do. I don't want to be a director; I totally admire what a director can do. I don't want to be a producer anymore; I admire what they can do. They are all different stages of building a voice and beyond sending your script; it's not your voice anymore because they've got a licence to make it. But, if you know that voice needs elevating with the intelligence of a director and then the intelligence of actors and intelligence of a producer, all of them can't do what you do...you don't get robbed, nobody nicks it off you! If they're clever, they'll elevate your voice and that's why they've paid tens of thousands for it. If they're shit, they'll put their own voice in and nobody else's and then it dies and they take the blame. Because it might have been a good script and good performances and the direction was shit and I love knowing that they are separate things now, because I used to think that I was responsible for all of that. Now, not only am I not responsible for it, I love anticipating what a director is about to do and it's the same script, with the same sentence, but that's more visual and colourful than you would have done it. I've done it in kind of a blue, he adds a purple, the actors put a green in and the producer comes in and goes 'oh wow'.

KR: But, have you ever had your vision misinterpreted, so they don't hear the note, like music?

PA: Yeah, I mean lots of times and you kind of look at that, but then you can whinge about it until you're blue in the face, but the only thing you ought to do is learn how not to let that happen again. So you go, 'can we talk about how this director is going to work on this before I sell it to you' and you get to a stage when you're going 'oh that producer, with that director...wow'. But, I know what I've written is safe and they can only add to it and a lot of people just say 'god the director just stole it away', well don't let them! Put your voice so intractably in there that it can't not look like their fault if they fuck it up.

KR: Has an actor ever fucked it up?

PA: Oh actors, oh Christ yeah...we're not going there!

On the first week of recording *Shameless*, *Lip* and *Ian*, the two brothers, were cast back to front. We cast them the way they are now, then reverse, then back, then reverse. We cast Jody Latham as the gay one and Gerard as the straight one and of course it was patently obvious when I was sitting there looking at the first five days rushes, I said 'we've done it the wrong way round'. Because Lip is a generically good-looking kind of social being and of course if he was gay he would just go out and get laid and leave. Ian looks more complex, he's more intelligent, has a lot more tapestry and of course he is the one who ends up shagging the Asian grocer and of course he's the one who has to stay, because he's got more moral intention for the family than Lip does. That day I put my hand up, I reckon every centimetre cost us £100,000, I went 'we've done it wrong' after five days shooting and it cost half a million pounds to fix it, but it was the right thing to do. So, I'm really proud of myself for saying that, but I wasn't that week...I was scum! I said it too loudly. We'd done the wrong thing and if we didn't fix it, we would have done the wrong thing forever.

Q: When you're submitting to write for TV or Radio is it essential to submit in that format. So, radio play or TV script or can you submit a theatre script or a short story to give a sense of the writing that you are interested in?

PA: I think it depends on the latitude you've got, with the producer you are sending it to, if you write to them first and say look, I haven't written a play yet into the radio format. I think it would be rude to say I'm sending you a radio play and it comes out like a short story, because that's not a radio play and actually that means that you are escaping from the task of making the airwaves work as a personality. If you have written a beautiful short story it's about saying how you were going to use the space between the sentences and how you are going to communicate that atmosphere, because prose is so intensively descriptive, invites nature, and radio can't be.

Q: I meant storylining.

PA: Storylines are treatments, yeah. If you send a treatment for a piece, that's more polite than sending a script, but you have to let them know that's what you want to do and they're not going to say they want to buy it from there, they'll want to see how you render that as an industry script for radio, television, film or whatever.

KR: From writersroom's perspective, we'd always rather read a script than a short story. Whether it's theatre or film, it doesn't matter, at least we can see how your characters work.

PA: Actually these days there's no excuse for not having the format, because it's all online. My PA's just put a stage play I wrote fifteen years ago into a film script format, looking at it I can see how rude the differences are between a stage play and a film script. I'm fine with it looking rude, because it's meant to embarrass me so I fix things. But, if all I did was send a synopsis of that to get however many millions it costs to make it into a film, at my stage in the game, nobody would give me the money for that. They'd want to see how I wanted to render it, or they'd want me to describe as a screenwriter, as a visual writer, how I'm going to do that. They wouldn't want the stage play to speak for the film; because there's a massive amount of deficits in the way that story can be told. In theatre you can apply things for no cost of set, it's all set in a big public garden, well that's three and a half million just to render a garden over four seasons. You've got to know what you're doing, but it's so easy to find out what you're doing now at that technical level...it's free! It didn't used to be.

Q: Do you feel undervalued as a writer?

PA: No I don't actually... what I know I did with a kind of conscious spectrum was to write *State of Play* and *Shameless* in the same year. Because *Clocking Off*, *Butterfly Collectors*, *Linda Green*, they are the northern tack. Tim Gardener at Channel 4 regarded me as "miserabilist" and I thought *Clocking Off* wasn't and *Linda Green* wasn't. But because you're northern they think that you're talking industrial and like a Luddite and so I knew what I was doing with *State of Play*. The minute I put it out I kept getting journalists saying 'so why aren't you more spread out than you are', and they were talking crap. But they will impose that on you, and in the same way Bleasdale is described as "hard hitting" and he wrote some really delicate, beautiful, flute like dramas which never get a mention. His talent is just harnessed by the press and really cheesy, reductive definitions of what he can do; so I wrote *State of Play* and *Shameless* within the same calendar year and I went 'fuck off.'

Q: I didn't mean in comparison to other writers, I mean in terms of like everyone knows who directed it and everyone knows who the actors are in it, yet you created it...

PA: I don't, because that's why you are a writer, because you don't want to swan down the street like you're a soap star and it's terrifying when you do. The only time it's ever happened to me, I was at the Paul Weller concert and someone said 'Paul, Paul can you sign me an autograph' and his management were going 'you can't come in' and he was like 'no I meant him'. That's the only time in my life that's going to happen! The whole point of being a writer is that you're speaking from the inside out; the vanity has to go on in the work, not the recognition. If you're not recognised for achievement when you think you ought to have been, of course your ego gets dented and

that's not the same thing. For all the things that I've done, I got more phone calls when I got back from Greece recently to tell me that Parky had mentioned me and well he's not a commissioner...he does a talk show, but he's a nice fan. You get more recognition from your family for the fact that someone as high up as Parky could do that, but you can't slide under the radio and you can't do what I do and be this many different things because you look slightly psychotic - which I am!

Q: My question for both of you is about the future of the industry, three, four years in the future. As you said the pot of the writers is very small amongst the twenty episode American sorts and with that pot, because of commissioners not spending as much money because of advertising revenues or scope for that audience, things changing with digital platforms, On Demand and the Aqua TV thing coming out in November, iPhone, has new writing has got a bigger voice?

PA: It hasn't really, it's got a bigger landscape, not a bigger voice.

Q: With the internet, you can create something with a different outlet, where do you think it's going? I mean obviously writing for *Casualty* or for radio drama is different, but now we're almost back to when short film began. A ten minute thing on an iPhone is going to be different to a long-running drama series and what do you see from your point of view?

PA: I think that's the answer because talent rises to the top and the problem with most talent is that it's not talent, it's talent with a small t and people put it out there and say "it never got picked by the BBC, but I saw fifteen copies of it on the web." Fifteen!!! Well, you're meant to sell three and a half million! I think the best thing about the web stuff is that it will expose your level of competition and I think that will rack people's bar up, rack up standards and all that. But, it's so big and it will take as long.

I've seen stuff that I've given people work from. Somebody sent me a mini-movie one time, of one tiny thing that they did and I thought that was so clever and so talented. You know she's not earning a wage from writing yet but I know that she did something that I couldn't do and that's a really powerful thing. The problem is the sheer volume of people thinking what they do is any good, you know...a lot of people shouldn't have a keyboard, about seventy percent of people shouldn't have a keyboard that lets them send that script out. People don't calibrate their work, they think sixty pages for a television script or one-hundred and twenty for a movie script, there isn't a word in it that means anything from them, or that I would buy and I'm not dismissive of that. You just go, no and again and again and you can move people's bar up really easily. I think the web will start to do that, because we will readily see the talent that's coming out that's better. You don't have to wait for it to be transmitted expensively on television, it goes out for a few pence now.

KR: I think it's just exciting, because if you think what's happened in the music industry, it is about change in the end. But, it's always going to be about content, your ability to create characters and tell a story and I just think that the fact that there is innovation online and the mini-drama or on the phone or whatever is a good thing.

Q: Do you see an investment from the BBC to say right, this is *EastEnders* let's do it so everyone has got it on the way to work on the tube, so they've got it on their phones?

KR: Eventually that will happen, but there are rights issues...

PA: I'd rather stick pins in my eyes than watch *EastEnders* on the way to work! Jesus, I'd rather a short film.

KR: But, it costs so much. But, if you just go on the Film Network there's a fantastic range of short films there you can watch. The BBC is just about to do a whole new lot of online dramas and teen dramas so there's just a big shift.

PA: The truth is I think you're inverting both philosophies, the point of doing it the way you're talking about is because you just can. You don't need endorsement or licence or a fee to do that, with a phone or mates. I swear,

if you had a ten page script, that's one of the most blistering you could ever write, I don't know a single actor in the world, who would turn you down for a part in that and you don't go, I can't do it till November! We are doing ten short films at the moment and we've had offers from Hollywood A List actors to be in them, but we can't afford it as we're only making them for £10,000 each but they don't care. Their agent cares when you get to that conversation and you've put them on deferral and stuff like that, but there's no money to be made - it's about *doing* stuff. Perversely, I'm in a situation of being more compelled to do short films in the way that I ought to have done when I started in 1983 than ever. I'm just going 'I don't want telly not to do it'.

KR: And you don't have to wait on other people, there's so much that you can do and get it seen, that's the main thing.

Q: It's just a question of how do you know when to stop?

PA: Well, I don't know because I never have and the truth is that on the last *Shameless* script that I wrote I had done thirty-eight drafts and they've told me that. I exhausted them before they just went 'we've put it into a shooting script now', because it costs money to change every single page and you go 'why've they done that, it's too early'. Then they say 'we start shooting on Friday, you're not allowed to keep re-writing stuff!' I was saying that to one of the of the people I mentor today, whose just got a *Shameless* script though, and she was brilliant because she realises that there were things that she needs to do. You shouldn't apologise for that, because actually even if you upset people and it involves an actor coming back, they will tell you if you can or you can't, but the clever ones will ask if it's a better idea and they will see what they can do to make that happen. You're meant to be unsatisfied with the way the script turns out when you see it on TV, you can't sit there and say 'that's a corker' as if it is, you're dead in the water.

Q: I just wanted to talk about the beginnings of writing. I was just wondering what's the best way of developing your writing skills? What do you think about shadowing writers or joining writers groups?

PA: I think before you do that you need to get something that you are proud of and something you can defend, and if you put it into a group of scrutinisers and they don't think what you think, you have to decide whether they're stupid and imbecilic or whether you haven't done the best job at brokering what you're thinking to the world. Then nobody can tell you what the gap between those two things is. There are things I've done and people don't know what I'm talking about and they say it's not saying that, but it is and I've fought it tooth and nail. When you get more evolved professionally, you get people who you're just instantly going to trust what they tell you. My wife's the worst one, I get her to help script edit loads of other writers' work, but I daren't show her work that's not ready because she'll say it's just not me....that's at four in the morning and you're delivering the next day. She's honest to the point of brutality, but only because I wouldn't dare give it to her earlier to take her influence because I wouldn't want criticism. You have to learn it's not personal to get critique. My dad has never ever once mentioned that I'm a writer and he'll say 'I saw you on telly the other night', you go 'oh well that's a lifetime achievement BAFTA', not I saw you on telly again! The best compliment I have ever had from my dad and the best one I'll ever get was after *State of Play* and he said 'Bloody ridiculous, 59.5 minutes and I couldn't get up to make a cup of tea'. He said 'at least cowboy films have breaks'.

Q: How useful do you find it working with actors before production?

PA: It's quite hard because to work with actors before production unless they are your mates because you have to pay them from that point. If you're telling their agent that you're desperate to work with that actor before you constitute a part for them, they'll go 'alright is she essential?' She is on wages from the time you are writing the script.

Q: But creatively, I mean say if you are in a position where you have new actors that could do it, do you think it's a hindrance?

PA: I love it! I did it with Peter Kay on two films, *Michael Fry* and *Linda Green* and I just asked him if he was up for it and he said 'oh I, course I am'. Trying to gauge what he thinks I'm talking about, knowing that actually he will say what he wants on the day - it won't be my script, and if you get him involved early enough, he will know what your script is trying to say so he won't let you down. He's fantastic! He's put some of the best lines in my stuff, for instance in *Michael Fry* I'd written this solemn and earnest piece about a barman, like home doctor and he's the online doctor specialist who was a barman, who was talking to *Michael Fry*, and *Michael Fry* said 'oh no, the baby's coming out of hospital Thursday'. He says 'has he had a cat scan', 'yeah coming home in a bag' and that got mentioned in every review I got. So I'm fine with that, if it's that way round.