

Two scriptwriters determined to close down 'minority' television

## Screen Gems

**Andrea Stuart** talks to two scriptwriters from black and Turkish communities who, despite the institutional obstacle course, have been successful in writing for popular television. **Trix Worrell** writes *Desmond's*, Channel 4's most successful sitcom. A second series of programmes is currently being broadcast. He has worked as writer, director and producer in the theatre and in film. He was co-author of the feature film *For Queen And Country*.

**Ayshe Raf** has written plays for theatre and radio. She now writes for *EastEnders* which celebrates its fifth anniversary this month. She also contributed to the popular, off-beat detective series *South Of The Border*. They talk about their experience of a monochrome world where television is still overwhelmingly more white than black.

### How did you get into writing?

**Trix** I've been writing for about 12 years. Before that I was an actor and I had so many scripts that made me think, 'My God, I could do better than this'. I said this to too many people, and eventually they said, 'Well why the hell don't you?' So I did.

Then I got the Kenneth Branagh syndrome and I realised that I wanted to write seriously and direct and also to produce my own work. I got to the stage where I couldn't continue in theatre. I found the snobbishness and restrictions that go with it to be very limiting. I was breastfed on television so I was drawn to film. The more theatre work I did, the more cinematic it became.

**Ayshe** I used to write poems and short stories, articles, none of it much good. I tried playwriting last. I was working as an estimator at an engineering company. I got drunk one lunchtime and thought to myself: 'I could be here in 10 years' time and this could be my life.' So I went back and said I was going, just walked out of it.

I did a writing course, they were all full except for playwriting, so I did that. I'd never been to a theatre in my life before. After I read out my first exercise, which had taken a week to write, there was complete silence. Nobody could think of a polite thing to say about it. I was so frustrated and I thought to myself: 'Right, I'm going to write a play. I can do it.'

And I did. Then I got into one of the first Half Moon Theatre workshops, which was very good. We all went to see a play at the Soho Poly and someone said that I should show my play to Bill

Ash who was running the literary side at the time. I went up there three times with my play before I had the courage to give it to him. Anyway they put it on and commissioned a second one. I've now written five for Soho Poly and then I started doing things for radio.

### Both of you seem to have come to writing without an obvious theatrical background. How has your work been influenced by changing attitudes to black and ethnic arts?

**Trix** You're absolutely right. I came from left-of-field really. In many ways in the 70s black theatre was really kicking it and it opened many doors. But there was a certain amount of pandering to us from middle-class administrators who were doling out all the money. It was always issue-based, tackling various problems that they saw we were living with.

The upshot of it is that black theatre companies are only now beginning to find their own ground. They are truer to the black experience. And people are coming to see it, that's the important thing. White audiences can see another side to black culture, a celebratory side and that's really important.

**A lot of the problems with 'ethnic programming' are to do with this idea that anti-racism and 'issues' determine programme content. It's all very reactive and leads to the representation of being black or being Turkish as only a 'problem'. Not just in documentaries, but also in something like *EastEnders*. How do you approach the scripting of black and ethnic characters?**

**Ayshe** There aren't many

black or ethnic characters in the programme at all at the moment but I'm glad when I get an opportunity to write for the Asian family who are Muslims. I'm from a Muslim background and at the moment we're dealing with an arranged marriage for the daughter. I was pleased to be able to write that. Somebody else might not have been as sensitive to the feelings an issue like this involves.

### Are you very conscious of your own background in your writing?

**Ayshe** No, I was born and grew up in London and all my writing mirrors the society around me. I don't mix in a very Turkish world, really, the society I write about is the working-class society that I live in.

**Trix** My first plays were geared towards the working-class background but the people who turned up at the theatre, even though it was the ordinary fringe theatre, weren't the local people - they had to be dragged in by their hair. So we took the play around community centres and youth clubs. And there people were listening, they chose to come to see it. It was brilliant.

**Ayshe** I think it's changed now. When I was a teenager, there weren't any ethnic role models. The next generation will be a lot better off. But I also have the other problem which is that, because I'm Turkish, a Cypriot, people expect me only to write about Turkish people. But the more they say it, the more I don't want to force myself to do it. I write about what is around me.

### What were your major influences?

**Ayshe** The American dramatists, my absolute favourite is Eugene O'Neill. I love them because they deal with the emotions whereas I find English writers tend to deal more with the intellect. From tv it must be the 'golden age of British tv drama', you know, the old *Armchair Theatre* and studio dramas.

**What about you, Trix? Do you draw from a wide range of influences?**



*Desmond's*: No stereotypes

**Trix** Very much so.

**I had the feeling that whereas the films of someone like Hanf Kureishi are very literary, in your film *For Queen And Country* there was a great sense of the visual.**

**Trix** One of the things I particularly wanted to get away from when writing *For Queen And Country* was the 'talking head'. I have always felt that British films somehow reflected the theatre. You are talked at and spoken to, so the dramatic action doesn't unfold itself.

When I write for *Desmond's*, I write loads of dialogue before starting to strip it right down. But when I start to write a film, I don't even think about writing dialogue. I think about the mood of the



situation and where it's going to be placed.

I think that's because black culture is not actually a question of pontificating, not a question of sitting around speaking dialogue. It's about extracting the mood and getting to the point. A film should start to tell a story very quickly.

#### What do you watch on tv?

**Ayshe** I like thrillers, like *Taggart* and Ruth Rendell mysteries. I'm the only person in the world who likes *Campion*. I watch a lot of drama and I must admit I do like some quiz games.

**Trix** I love *Blockbusters*, actually, I think it's a very good programme. There goes my street cred! *Only Fools And Horses* is brilliant,

but I have a problem with it. The person who directed the second series directed *Desmond's*. When she knew she was going to direct *Desmond's*, she wanted to meet me. I invited her to come down to my house. So she made the trek from Fulham to Peckham.

When she arrived, I said, 'I want you to come with me'. I took her just round the corner to the market and down Peckham High Street and when we got back, I said, 'Well, what did you see?' And she said, 'The market was great...' And I said, 'You saw some black people, didn't you?' And she said, 'Yeah.' And I said, 'Why the hell aren't there any black people in *Only Fools And Horses*?' The whole series is supposed

to be based in Peckham.

#### How do you see the situation changing in the context of deregulation?

**Ayshe** Deregulation defies logic. There are examples of it - France, Italy, Australia - and it doesn't work.. It's suicidal. I just hope that some concessions can be gained through the definition of 'quality'. Otherwise, audience figures will rule and we'll just end up with more and more game shows. Anyone who wants to do something slightly brave or risky - and ethnic is risky as far as they are concerned - will be shoved way down the line of priorities.

**You'd need your own channel to broadcast your own thing.**

**Yrix** Maybe that is the way forward. Recently I was asked to write three episodes of *Yellowthread Street* and I thought: 'Great, I've never been to Hong Kong before!' But then I said: 'No, hang on a minute, this is a huge international co-production and it's all just about audiences. Anything ethnic or black or whatever is going to go way down the list here.' So I didn't do it. They're just going to come up with these glossy international co-productions.

#### Who will be making programmes that are relevant to ethnic communities?

**Yrix** I think they will make them but the format will be the popular black American formats by a limited number of established writers. I was outraged in the States to see how the companies don't allow new writers to come to the fore at all. They stick to a team of six to 12 writers and new people just don't get a look in.

Unless somebody comes through as a black producer to challenge that, or indeed be part of that, then when the deregulated system closes in, the same thing is going to happen here. It's happening already with the BBC's commitment to 25% independent productions. The top nine producers have left to form their own company and they'll sell programmes to the BBC. This will let very little light come through for anybody else. Channel 4 is doing the same thing. They want co-productions, 'We give you two bob, you raise the other £2m!'

**Ayshe** I think it's going to be a slow erosion, but it will get more like America where tv is geared to grab your attention straight away, written to a format, none of it's challenging.

#### Has it been easier getting into television as black or ethnic writers? Is there an access that there isn't in film?

**Yrix** To be honest, I don't think there is much access, if there were then you'd see more of us. Getting into the stable of *EastEnders* writers is probably one of the few outlets. In terms of film, of

course, there is still an amazing problem. And I can't understand it. One of the most popular stars in the States is Eddie Murphy. He pulls in umpteen million viewers. Why can't producers see that there's an audience there?

**Ayshe** The problem is that there still aren't enough people commissioning at the top of the tree. In the BBC and ITV, for example, there are no black or Turkish people. Maybe with Channel 4 things are getting better, but this is why we don't have the programmes.

**Trix** And we aren't going to get them quickly either. I came up with a series idea which had no black or ethnic characters for TVS. I rang them and they read the treatment and loved it to death. They asked me to their London office. But as soon as I walked through the door this guy's mouth dropped to his feet.

He hadn't detected on the phone that I was black. He asked if I was sure that I could write this. So I said: 'listen, I've been through the same educational system, say, as your son, right? Went to university and did English, the whole works? I know about your Chaucers and your Shakespeares. Are you telling me I can't write it? What's your problem? Give me a chance.'

**Is that your experience as well, Ayshe? What drew you to tv work, and was it difficult getting started?**

**Ayshe** Well, I grew up with television and I was drawn to television work by the status of having work on tv. And the money. But it took me a long time to get there, endless phone calls, letters. My agent and I were both after the commissioning editor from Channel 4 and Tony Holland from *EastEnders* because it was the perfect thing for me.

Neither of them wanted to take a risk with me because I hadn't written for television before. But they both put me forward for the first BBC Writers' Workshop. A few months after that I got an episode of *EastEnders* to do and then I got an episode of

*South Of The Border*. That's how I got in but I had to go to the workshop first.

**When you do get the chance to write about people from your own communities do you feel a special pressure as a writer?**

**Ayshe** I don't want to write about the Turkish community only as a problem, in that sense I don't want to show them in a disadvantageous way. I don't want to put out to the world that this is a community of moaners.

**Do you ever think that as well as creating role models, you are also a role model yourself? How do you feel about that idea?**

**Ayshe** I'm happy to be a role model because the Turkish community is a hidden, quiet Muslim community, keeping themselves to themselves. They're peaceful, so you never get to see or hear much about them.

**What about the pressure to present our communities as homogeneous angels, as positive stereotypes?**

**Trix** I think that, as writers from various cultural viewpoints, we have only just started to get access to popular programming. In many ways we have always been steered towards the documentary. When I went to film school, there was this assumption that I was going to be a documentary producer.

Now we've got to get away from the idea that 'black' is a blanket expression, regardless of where we come from, who we might be. We have to go into the fact that blacks are different individuals, they come from different islands, have their own private prejudices like everybody else. It's time for us to start to show that.

I didn't realise that *Desmond's* would be as successful as it is but the thing is that it's just a start. I want to see more black and ethnic drama. I want to see much more because, you know, we're the 'song and dance people' and we are the butt of jokes but we are also very good actors, we've got good dramatic stories to tell and we should be doing that now.