
The Imitation Game

Editor: Ian McEwan
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Albert begins to turn Maisie inside out. All the while he continues to kiss her. Maisie's groans suggest the abandonment of lovemaking, as well as fear and pain. Maisie begins to disappear.

What can one say about a writer who includes directions like that in a television script? And features, in the same play, a severed 12-inch human penis floating in a sealed glass jar?

Several thoughts rush to mind. Does he really expect to get away with it? How do you show lovers in action to that extent on television? How do you get the female partner into a position which would tax the agility of a professional contortionist? In the midst of all this, how do you get her to disappear into thin air? How can you expect a producer to tackle something like this in the first place? Where do you find a broadcasting authority willing to screen it?

As a script writer with only SABC - TV for a local market, I stand in awe of Ian McEwan's audacity - and, oh, how I envy the man. Imagine even being able to contemplate scenes like that!

The irony, though, is that Solid Geometry, the second of the three plays in this collection, was too hot even for the BBC - and this despite the fact that it was commissioned by the corporation's Pebble Mill studios in Birmingham which encouraged experiment and allowed writers to "kick over the traces."

The play was inspired by a fascinating idea: that it is mathematically possible to postulate a plane without a surface. In the script, the phenomenon can be demonstrated by folding a piece of paper in such a way that it can be made to disappear. Albert discovers that the human body, "folded" in similar fashion, can also be made to disappear. Hence the acrobatic love scene.

Forewards, or introductions, to collections such as this often make as interesting reading as the scripts themselves, for they lift the veil on the author's creative processes. McEwan explains in this introduction that Solid Geometry "seemed to tie up odds and ends that, at one point, seemed to belong to two or three stories." I fear they still do, and I cannot for the life of me figure out the significance of the preserved penis. But McEwan is certainly not afraid to experiment. I would love to see Solid Geometry in performance, its obscurity notwithstanding.

Jack Flea's Birthday Party is an innocuous piece of whimsy, reminiscent of Harold Pinter, which works because it is hilariously funny, even in reading. David Lee is a young man living with an older woman, Ruth. David invites his parents to celebrate his birthday party and for the first time they meet Ruth. The two women start competing to out-mother David. Reality is by degrees transformed into fantasy, and fantasy back into reality, culminating with our discovery in the final 30 seconds that David is mothered by Ruth to the ultimate extreme. She puts him to bed in a large cot and leaves a night-light burning for his security!

Ian McEwan eschews "simple" plays. Even The Imitation Game, the third and longest of the three plays and the closest to an orthodox television drama, combines multiple ideas and themes. But, unlike Solid Geometry, The Intimate Game is held together by a clear and powerful narrative line and, for me, is the most successful for this reason.

It's a feminist play, punchy and uncompromising, set during World War 2. Cathy, just out of school, has a compulsion to contribute to the war effort by doing important and meaningful work. The nearest she gets to this ideal, after refusing to work in a munitions factory, is in a radio interception unit, tediously writing down coded wireless messages for someone else to decipher. Her determination to discover more about the deciphering processes leads to her being court-martialled on a charge of spying.

The background is meticulously researched, and it is here that McEwan layers his work with additional ideas and themes which raise it above the level of conventional television entertainment. The play, for example, also deals with the work of Ultra, the decipherment of the German Enigma codes by a staff of Cambridge mathematicians who developed the first primitive computers. And it includes an authentic radio talk on women's contribution to war which is so callously condescending it outsines any fiction.

Students of television writing will note the dramatic contrast in techniques between a play like Jack Flea's Birthday Party - a studio four-hander requiring a single set - and The Imitation Game which has 60 scenes, and was shot on film with a cast of 27 characters. The two plays illustrate the extremes of television drama productions, and the vast discrepancy in budgets. The Imitation Game would be prohibitively expensive by normal standards, but the production is an indication of the importance the BBC attaches to its long-running Play for Today series which transmitted the play in April, 1980.
