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World writing and radio drama

The BBC World Service runs a biennial international radio playwriting competition, one that does take a full two years to administer, partly because the prize-winners come to Portland Place to see their plays being produced. The plays are subsequently broadcast to audiences of several million around the world. These broadcasts always remind of two miraculous joys – radio and storytelling.

The most recent three competitions have been co-produced by The Open University with the World Service, so I've had some involvement as creative writing academic adviser. The competition has other collaborators. The British Council are permanent partners and Commonwealth Writers are occasionally involved, but always offer the Commonwealth Foundation premises at Marlborough House in central London for the prize-giving. This is an instance of how the world might work collaboratively – with imagination and creativity to the fore, across continents, with flair, dedication and professionalism, all emphasised in the final studio process – with actors, directors, technicians and writers all combining their talents and effort to make a listener somewhere pause and consider. Drama is by definition a joint creation, and also a unifying force.

The winning playwrights – established dramatists, writers from other genres or sometimes complete newcomers – are truly international. Winners from the previous two competitions have come from Australia, Zimbabwe, Mexico, Canada, Uganda and Brazil. The most recent winners come from Yemen, Belgium (with a play set in South Africa) and Nigeria, with overall entries from 114 countries. The BBC may have its detractors, but few writing competitions could match that global reach.

The plays all illustrate what radio can achieve as a dramatic medium. They include a vast range of stories - from slavery, war and corruption, to domestic comedies; we see farces set in India, dams bursting in Brazil, forest fires in Canada and a hold-up on a train in South Africa. Radio can tell these stories fluently and relatively cheaply (by comparison to film or TV), and yet the dramas are compelling, rich and vivid. As is often claimed in the writing manuals: the pictures are better on radio.

The OU's collaboration is responsible for the third award, the Georgi Markov prize, which celebrates the most promising script from the competition's shortlist. This prize was set up in memory of Georgi Markov, who became famous for the way he was murdered – a poisoned umbrella, which now, suddenly, seems remarkably contemporary. But Markov should also be remembered as a writer. He championed freedom of creative expression and also worked for the BBC World Service as a journalist.

In an age where borders seem to be hardening, international contact between writers becomes all the more important. This competition is an iconic zone of 'no borders' creativity. What's more it's of educational use. Through the OU's partnership with the BBC the competition's scripts, offcuts, retakes, interviews and the broadcast plays themselves have been used in HE distance learning teaching materials. Our OU writing courses teach students how to mine stories from their own life experience, and how to develop them imaginatively. We get very similar approaches from the plays and the interviews with these international writers.

The part of the OU that commissioned my assistance is called Open Learn, and it houses details of these competitions – see below. But there are also details of other creative writing collaborative projects, for example the Bronte biographical film *To Walk Invisible*, Radio 3's *Ian McMillan's Writing Lab* and Andrew Marr's *Paperback Heroes*. Look them up. Some creative writing resources have been made freely available, and you might find them useful in your teaching.

References:

OU/BBC World Service International Playwriting Competition

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/playwritingcompetition>

OU/BBC 1 film co-production *To Walk Invisible*

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-thearts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/literature/walkinvisible-interview-the-cast>

OU/BBC documentary co-production *Andrew Marr's Paperback Heroes*

Paperback Heroes <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/tv-radioevents/tv/sleuths-spies-sorcerers-andrew-marrs-paperbackheroes>

OU/BBC Radio 3 co-production *Ian McMillan's Writing Lab* <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-thearts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/creativewriting/get-writing-tips-and-advice>

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