



Miranda Hart: Writing For Comedy

MIRANDA:

Well hello to you, fancy seeing you here. Welcome to my new home chez BAFTA. Well it's not really my home I'm, I'm just popping by but you know when in Rome. That doesn't really make sense, does it? Well when in Rome I'd probably just visit the Coliseum so, it's confusing. Good so any way, previously in my life and that's my real life, not my sitcom character Miranda, I know we're called the same I confuse myself but in my real life, I played a space officer in the sci-fi sitcom Hyperdrive. Oh yes.

CLIP FROM HYPERDRIVE

But it's not all work work work there you go, there's a buzzing café culture and then on a Sunday there's a farmers' market. They let you try cheeses, yum.

BLOKE:

We are very impressed.

FEMALE:

Yes we have lots of business looking for premises on earth and your Peterborough with its transport links and work life balance sounds ideal.

MIRANDA:

And I regularly make, well a tit of myself in the sitcom, Miranda.

CLIP FROM MIRANDA

Great!

FEMALE:

Just undo it in the back!

MIRANDA:

My god there's more.

CLIP OUT

MIRANDA:

Well there's nothing wrong with a bit of titting about that's what I say. Good, so right on with the show, or rather the BAFTA master class in writing thingumyjigumybob thing, so just crack on with it.

GRACE:

Ladies and gentlemen, the very wonderful Miss Miranda Hart.

MIRANDA:

Hobbling up, hello.

GRACE:

Can we talk about your childhood?

MIRANDA:

Right. Settle down everyone.

GRACE:

I was just going to start by saying were you an amusing child?

MIRANDA:

Apparently I was quite a serious child. So my parents would often take me to the theatre or I'd be watching telly completely glum faced and then they'd say what do you think of that and I'd say I thought it was hilarious. So I think I sort of took everything quite seriously.

I do remember from an early age sort of thing, sort of understanding and feeling the importance of laughter. I loved being silly.

GRACE:

At school, how did you feel at school? Were you funny?

MIRANDA:

I think, I tried to be, whether I was or not, but yeah probably element of the class clown yeah.

GRACE:

You've said that you didn't have those cool TV influences that comedians always talk about, they might name check The Young Ones or a Little Bit of Fry and Laurie, what were you watching when you were young?

MIRANDA:

I was watching Morecambe and Wise, Two Ronnies, Tommy Cooper, Joyce Grenfell that kind of thing. And just kept those videos with me and just watched that really.

MIRANDA CLIP IN

PENNY:

I am determined to find you someone and so drum roll please, I am hosting a Pride and Prejudiced theme party.

MIRANDA:

Wait mum, mum, did you say Friday? Oh I definitely can't make Friday.

PENNY:

Why not?

MIRANDA:

Well it's my daughter's first birthday.

PENNY:

You don't have a daughter.

MIRANDA:

I don't have a daughter. I am voting in the House of Commons.

PENNY:
You're not an MP.

MIRANDA:
I'm not an MP. I'm washing my shoes. I'll tell you what it is, I am baking a hedgehog for Tony Benn's anniversary. I can't I get in a panic, it's a condition I'm sweating. Oh hello, mum, listen. I don't want a party...

PENNY:
Such fun!

MIRANDA:
No I don't ...

PENNY:
Such fun!

MIRANDA:
No I don't think.

PENNY:
Such fun! Such fun, such fun, such fun such fun! MIRANDA CONSTANTLY TRYING TO GET WORD IN FINALLY PENNY WALKS OUT CLOSING DOOR

CLIP OUT

GRACE:
How did you get the BBC to look at your work and put it on because I hear of people, struggling away for years on end?

MIRANDA:
Yes that was the case with me.

GRACE:
Oh OK.

MIRANDA:
Yeah so going to the Edinburgh Festival every year for about ten years and writing and performing my own shows and then bringing them to London in London pubs and just writing to every producer that exists in the world to come and see my show.

GRACE:
You once said which I absolutely love that you kind of enjoy nothing about the writing process, I think I read that the other day. Tell me a little bit about writing the first draft, the first draft ever I think people would love to know about, the first of the pilot, was it hell?

MIRANDA:
Oh no the first pilot was great fun because I didn't think it would be on telly. I thought this is brilliant, I'll just write what my dream job would be, it would be a sitcom in what I am the lead, that'd be nice and you know let's, let's be really bold with this, I want to look to camera like Eric Morecambe did you know I just, I just thought I'm going to write my dream, my dream job. So it was great fun, I took, I took my time over it and

probably it took me kind of eighteen months to develop the whole thing so I had to work in between.

Never rush, so much rushing in television, quickly let's make a show, no cos it'll be shit. Well it will you've got to take your time it drives me insane. When the first series was going out I thought, I can't believe my dream, dream has come true I've got a sitcom on BBC and I remember saying to someone, the awful thing is if this goes well, I know that, I mean I didn't expect it to go well that's the thing, if it does go well, I thought I'm going to have to sort of hang my head in the BBC corridors so that you know peers then won't feel they have to say something cos no one in the industry is going to like this show, I know that for a fact.

You know, oh it's old-fashioned and I don't read reviews but apparently I freaked some of the producers out because I go, what was it today? I shouldn't like this show but I do and they'd gono! But obviously it set, you know I just knew the feel it would get because I sort of understood where comedy was at the time and we hadn't had, and studio shows just do get that response you know. Oh it's old-fashioned, it's main stream I'm not going to watch it.

Q:

Did you know from the beginning I'm assuming that's a studio audience, not a laugh track that you were going to do it in front of a studio audience? And was that always OK or were there any qualms about from on high?

MIRANDA:

In my head it was always a studio audience show, because as a performer and a writer I work best in front of a live audience and yes it is always filmed in front of an audio, a live audience, canned laughter does not exist. I don't, why did I say it like that?

I think, that's really funny. That's a thing I might write that down. It's because I was getting angry and I thought, cos it really winds me up when people think that is not, journalists, although you might be one, oh god, it's getting worse. Think, or go, oh I liked your show it's a shame that you put the laughter on at the end.

No, no but people have said that to me, television journalists have said that to me.

GRACE:

That was just a question.

MIRANDA:

No but I'm just amused because I was angry so I went sort of Italian to defuse it and write that down for me because it's a funny idea.

GRACE:

We're going to talk about structure in a scene and how you would structure a scene and I'd love to see. I'm going to show you a clip because this was different to anything else that you'd written in Miranda.

CLIP IN

PSYCHIATRIST:

I think we're making progress.

PENNY:

We are not making progress, we don't need progress or a session, act normal!

PSYCHIATRIST:

Maybe it might help if you saw things from each other's perspective. Perhaps try a bit of role play. Miranda as Penny, Penny as Miranda.

MIRANDA:

Fine good idea, oh hello everybody. Don't I look marvellous? Look at me, please I want to be the centre of what I call attention. Ha-ha, ha-ha hair flick, hair flick, keeping up appearances envy me, envy me!

PSYCHIATRIST:

I didn't mean just insulting each other.

PENNY:

Well hello I'm Miranda.

PSYCHIATRIST:

Oh dear.

PENNY:

I'm just going to waddle over here and waste more of my life. Oh, you've got nice plums as it very much were.

Aren't I naughty?

CLIP OUT

MIRANDA:

Actually stop press, I enjoyed writing that because for once you're not confined by a blooming sitcom plot which is so hard and complicated and like a jigsaw puzzle and obviously I had to work out the highs and lows and you know there was a lot of sort of jokes and I....

GRACE:

Just to remind people of the whole episode is set within those four walls it's away from your normal world. Why did you set yourself that challenge? Cos sure that is I mean ...

MIRANDA:

Well I thought it was going to be, when, I remember thinking, oh hang on me and Penny in a psychiatrist's office that's funny, that'll make a funny scene, brilliant cos I like to know that I've got some key sort of set pieces before I start even thinking about the whole series. So I thought brilliant, that's going on the wall.

And then when it came sort of towards the end of the process, I suddenly thought that's more, could that be a whole, a whole episode you know it seems like there could be so much there. And initially that was terrifying but as I say, removing although there is a bit of story in it and you have to pace it and there was a lot of sort of bit of a jigsaw puzzle working out which jokes are best here. It was very freeing to write, I think I wrote the first draft of that in three days. Loved it.

GRACE:

When you say, that's going on the wall, I've been in your office and it literally is on the wall.

MIRANDA:

Hmm, there is a sort of, there's a definite process there's a different wall for different things, there's a wall for set pieces, so that's will just be Post It notes with you know just saying things like sushi bar or bed shop or you know scenes that I think oh that will be funny for the character to be in.

GRACE:

Some of the Post It notes that are going on the wall are they kind of getting pulled out of your handbag? Things that you've written when you're sitting in the pub or something like that.

MIRANDA:

Yeah a bit of that, yeah. Like fart curtsy or whatever.

GRACE:

Fart curtsy.

MIRANDA:

That'll be on the joke wall that's just a little joke rather than big scene. And then there will be the story wall where it's the whole kind of almost graph like working out, how the plot's going to work.

CLIP IN

MAN:

Clive is it?

CLIVE:

Yes, nice to meet you at last.

MAN:

Girls?

GIRLS:

Hello?

MIRANDA:

Why am I curtseying? I've just got to keep going now. How do you do?

SOUND OF FART

Sorry? Sorry that was my dog.

MAN:

What was?

MIRANDA:

That noise.

MAN:

I thought that was a chair scraping.

MIRANDA:

Oh it was.

MAN:
Then what was your dog?

MIRANDA:
I don't have a dog.

MAN:
You said the noise was your dog.

MIRANDA:
Well it might have been your dog.

MAN:
I don't have a dog.

MIRANDA:
Well can you stop saying, you do.

CLIP OUT

GRACE:
Do you remember writing that, literally sitting at your laptop and writing that?

MIRANDA:
Yeah, yeah.

GRACE:
In your house?

MIRANDA:
In my house, yes.

GRACE:
Is that where you write?

MIRANDA:
Yeah. It's fascinating isn't it?

GRACE:
Have you got an office? I find that interesting.

MIRANDA:
Like four walls and everything I've got a laptop and I go like that.

GRACE:
You haven't got an office that you go somewhere else?

MIRANDA:
Well sometimes I work at the BBC if I'm getting lonely, I'll come in and you know sometimes you need to see some world and some people and have lunch with someone. That actually was a rare example of a scene that just was written like that and never changed.

Curtseying in an awkward situation coming up and farting I just was pretty sure that was funny and then I just needed to find the high status situation to do that in and so

when I was thinking right now the hunky chef needs to come in, right what can I do? Ah! Fart curtsey, perfect. And then just, very rarely does it happen when you just, well not that rarely, for someone who's been writing dialogue it does happen. Just, what dog? It was the chair, you know that, a page just happened I thought, oh my god.

And very rarely do I ever go oh I'm funny. And in that instance I did. But that's very rare, you know you write what you think is funny and that...

GRACE:

Is farting always funny?

MIRANDA:

For me farting is always funny and some people might find that puerile and ridiculous I mean you couldn't do it in every episode.

GRACE:

Or you could.

MIRANDA:

I'd want to but. I'd feel you couldn't, I mean yeah.

MIRANDA CLIP IN

MIRANDA:

OK, calm compose myself. Smile.

MAN:

Miranda?

Hi, how are you? Are you okay?

You look, like you're in pain.

MIRANDA:

No, no, I'm fine, it's just trapped wind.

Ah! That's better.

CLIP OUT

GRACE:

At the beginning of writing did you do it kind of forensically, were you very sort of technical when you were working it out?

MIRANDA:

Yeah I think I was yes when I thought well my dream would be a sitcom with a light entertainment feel where we could dance, you'd be watching and I could look to camera, so great so my person will fit that as the lead so and then that's was the bare bones and then who to put around her, you know what, what, what's funny so then absolutely it was a question of okay the mother, what would the mother be and talking about all the options, would she be low status, is it funny if she's high status you know.

And is my character ever high status so is there a lower status character in it and yeah all those things. I think writing comedy is incredibly technical, that's why it's so dreary.

MIRANDA CLIP IN

MIRANDA:

Gary, what are you doing here?

GARY:

Well I work here I'm the new chef. I started last week.

MIRANDA:

Oh well my shop's next door.

GARY:

No way!

MIRANDA:

Yeah.

GARY:

Well it's great to see you. It's been ages.

CLIP OUT

GRACE:

One of the things that struck me most of all.

MIRANDA:

I'm scared because I can't see where you are. Hello. I'm fine now you can continue.

GRACE:

Amongst all the kinds of massive laughs one of the things that struck me most was the scene where Miranda sort of finds out that Gary's married and there is this true like massive drop like real heart break, I wondered whether you sort of knowingly put that in as the greatest low ever? And whether that is the sort of thing that we'd see more of, cos it just seems so unusual and yet so sort of compelling.

MIRANDA:

Yeah well I talked to, I have some writers that help me at then, when I've thought of the ideas I then in a room with one or two others help my storyline it and we did talk a lot about that cos I was saying there has got to be a very very good reason why Miranda and Gary, sorry I can talk about my character even though it's my name, sorry about that, don't get together because I can't bear will they won't theys and they drive me insane which is, which is why I sort of have fantasy moments of us kissing cos I think I want to give the audience something because I'd be sitting there going oh just kiss, they drive me mad.

So when we nearly get together in the episode before I thought there's got to be such a good reason why we don't and so I thought well hang on, what happens if she's, if he's married to this character and one of the storyliners said that is ridiculous, it's not East Enders, no one's going to believe it

And then the other person went with me and said, no I think you're right it has to be that big, you know otherwise people will just go oh just forgive him and get together for goodness sake.

So, but it was, it was very difficult, that was another issue with doing a sort of one of the moments in front of a studio audience is hard because you've then got to find the gag quickly a minute later.

GRACE:

Does that mean that she's never going to forgive him?

MIRANDA:

Not, sort of beginning to know, so oh! The power.

MIRANDA CLIP IN

GARY:

I know what we should do.

MIRANDA:

OK, let's just go.

GARY:

We should sleep together.

MIRANDA:

I should say obviously I don't usually just leap into bed.

GARY:

Oh god, no no, me too. I mean I've had some fun in the past as I'm sure you have.

MIRANDA:

Loads. Well some. I mean the odd spot of predominantly other kinds of fun to be honest.

MAN:

There is no easy way to tell you this, Kelly's pregnant and it's mine.

MIRANDA:

Get in!

GARY:

If this our moment then I don't want to regret not doing anything about it.

MIRANDA:

Really?

GARY:

Really.

MIRANDA:

Well me neither.

Gary, are we finally?

GARY:

I know. How long has it taken us?

MIRANDA:

Oh my god there's a woman on fire!

GARY:

I think it was a flambé.

CLIP OUT

MIRANDA:

It's so weird because that's what I think is hard about writing a studio audience show is that when you get to a point of oh you know real emotion or pathos you can't, it's really hard to do and really hard to act because you know then I was thinking god it must be quite freeing writing a comedy drama because I could have just written, so now I've got to put a big funny in the middle so you know as a flashback comes in.

GRACE:

I love that.

MIRANDA:

Or the ending has to be the woman on fire because you are still doing a studio sitcom and we did that, we filmed that on location rather than in the, in front of the audience and we kept, the director kept saying you've got to remember that you're going to be coming from really heightened big cos we were sort of you know trying to go, wow, Gary can you believe how long this has taken us and this terrible sort of sixth form acting and we thought oh we've just to play it and hope the audience go with it. So it's hard to put those moments in a studio audience sitcom I think.

GRACE:

Do you think that Miranda as a character can ever really be happy in love and the structure of the sitcom actually remain buoyant because that was a lovely moment where it actually felt as if that feels like it should have been the end of the series but obviously it wasn't. Can characters be happy?

MIRANDA:

I think so because I think ultimately my character is happy and she just won't let herself be and feels like she constantly needs to fit in and so that's where she goes wrong but ultimately if she just had the confidence to be herself she'd be a very happy slightly eccentric but very happy woman.

GRACE:

Yeah.

MIRANDA:

You wanted me to talk about the writing process thought I was a bit scared of you and you've got a regime.

GRACE:

I've got a regime.

MIRANDA:

I don't want to come to anything too soon she's been ticking things off she's numbered things. Well I don't want to ruin your numbering.

GRACE:

Oh I was going to talk about something else, tell me a little bit about working with Sarah Hadland I think she's marvellous.

MIRANDA CLIP

MIRANDA:

Fabreeze me up.

SARAH:

Yes, certainly.

CLIP OUT

MIRANDA:

We've struggled a lot to get Stevie big she was very different in the pilot and Sarah Hadland walked in going I can't, before we even start I've had builders next door, the scaffolders are driving me, you know when builders and went off in a minute to try I thought I could write Stevie this is brilliant and had I not seen that and just seen the tape, then I would have gone, yeah maybe.

And I did Hyperdrive when she did Moving Wallpaper and all the other shows that she'd done, she'd put a little yeah right in or a so at the beginning and I'd say you can't do any of that we'll just cut that in the edit, it's got to be bam because it's jokes and that's how it's written and I think that was very difficult.

GRACE:

Have you got a special look that you give people?

MIRANDA:

Well now and so the first series I had to be you know terribly polite to everybody and go thank you so much for that suggestion but the thing is that blah, blah, blah and now I was going no shit and they go fine and we have a system where we have gold silver and bronze stars and so they go, I've got a suggestion here and then if they get a gold star and it goes in I rush back to the bit where everyone was sitting about going oh I got a gold star and how did she get a gold star, my idea was funnier than that. So it's now really a family feel and they understand my process and I understand theirs and yeah.

MIRANDA CLIP IN

PENNY:

Quick I really wanted to introduce you to that vicar, so dishy.

MIRANDA:

Please I want to leave with a shred of dignity intact. Oh it was mortifying I wished the ground could have swallowed me up.

CLIP OUT

GRACE:

I just wondered if you had ever worked in a team and if you have worked in a team, whether you have joint ownership and how was that?

MIRANDA:

Yeah no I've never worked in a team as I say I've never written any other sitcom bar this one and it's our process is that I come up with the ideas I then I suppose for about a month spend it storylining, getting some help with a couple of people but you know then I'll probably do another month storylining on top of that myself to get it sorted and then I go away and write all the drafts on my own and then just at the very end of the process I have a couple of guys who maybe put some gags, actual gags in that the scene might, I'm not very good at actual one liners so sometimes to end a scene or some of the flashbacks may be theirs. So actual proper jokes so it's kind of yeah I draft it all and write all the scenes I don't flip the scenes back and forward. I draw graphs.

GRACE:

Do you?

MIRANDA:

Yeah I do actually. Yeah I know, well yeah, I don't know whether you want me to bore you about that?

GRACE:

No I've never heard of anyone doing that before.

MIRANDA:

Yeah I draw all sort of graph oh it's going well brilliant, right now how long can we sustain that cos something's got to change now.

GRACE:

No way.

MIRANDA:

So then either it'll change to get better again and then soon we are going to need the big fall so although each graph of each, you're looking at me like a freak, each...

GRACE:

Mo I think it's fascinating.

MIRANDA:

Each graph of each episode will look slightly different you know invariably they've got to look a bit like this so that things change or there's a big comedy fall.

GRACE:

When you did that did you actually know in your head how it should look, how the graph should look?

MIRANDA:

Yeah, sort of yeah sort of I suppose. Well I just make sure that every scene something changes or every scene something gets worse or gets better or ..

GRACE:

And you're working on series three?

MIRANDA:

Just started writing it.

GRACE:
How's that going then?

MIRANDA:
It's very early days Grace, it's very early days Grace. It's the sort of wandering round the street thinking you know what's funny stage, yeah so we shall see.

GRACE:
Blank pages?

MIRANDA:
The big blank page, yeah.

GRACE:
Of absolutely no ideas.

MIRANDA:
Yeah exactly. See what happens.

GRACE:
Thank you so much and I really think that people will have got a lot out of that that writers will have got a lot out of that and just ladies and gentlemen Miranda Hart.

APPLAUSE