

HOW MR PINERO WRITES PLAYS

TOLD IN AN INTERVIEW
BY BRAM STOKER

I FOUND Pinero in his London home, a charming flat looking over old-fashioned Hanover-square. The study where we met looks over the square to the south, and the roar of London traffic comes modified by height, but still existent.

Pinero has also a charming place in the country. An old farmhouse, "Stillands," at North-chapel, Sussex. This house has also an important bearing on the author's work, as will be seen.

The centre of both these places is the striking figure of the great dramatist himself. A man of a little more than medium height, not in any way stout but not abnormally thin; of well-knit, capable frame; a figure that suits a horseman, a bicyclist, a golfer, for Pinero is all of these and some others. He is quite an expert bicyclist.

His head and face are both peculiar and striking. One could never fail to recognise him in the flesh, having once seen his portrait. He is extremely bald, so that there is no mistaking his craniological peculiarities. A head something like an enormous egg. A masterful face, whose main characteristics are of insight, astuteness, and above all of subtlety. His forehead falls back over an enormous frontal sinus, that ridge of bone above the eyebrows which phrenologists take to mean a "power of distinguishing slight differences"; which being applied to use becomes practically knowledge of character. His eyebrows are wide and thick and strong, indeed of such size and manner as to become a necessary part of caricature and even of the delineation of exact character.

"How do you set about writing a play?" I began.

"The 'setting about' is fairly uniform, though the writing is various. I must tell you that to me the theme and the working out of it are very different things and require quite different setting. I must start the theme in a city. I must have life around me—eager, strenuous, pulsating life. It may be in a crowded thoroughfare. It may be here in my own room at night, with the sense of life around me; with the hum and roar of movement and traffic coming up to me from below. It is only when such is around me that my brain quickens to creative work. Later on, when the theme is accepted and the general scheme seems to take cohesive shape, the method of work entirely changes. I have to get away somewhere all by myself, where I shall have nothing and nobody to interrupt me."

"Do you work all day long?"

"Not at all. My actual day's work at the play is three or four hours. That is quite as long as the mind can remain fresh and is content to be concentrated. When the mind is getting wearied it becomes rebellious to details—and a play is all details."

"Is it all the same to you in what part of the day you work?"

"No! I do not work in the early morning. My time is at night or in the late afternoon. Perhaps I ought to explain that this is not altogether a matter of choice, but one of habit. In my early years of writing, while I was still an actor, my hours were of necessity late. In the morning I was rehearsing or studying my part; then, after the early dinner which is necessary in the routine of an actor's life, I rested to prepare for my night's work. Therefore, my only time, the only time I could depend on for play-writing, was late at night."

"Do you know, and can you say, why it is that retirement is necessary for your working out your ideas?"

"I think it is because my work is impersonal. In a play I am not, in anything I say, speaking for myself. I am merely the mouthpiece of the various characters; and that I may understand

and follow out the character of each in constantly varying conditions of mind I have to be able to hold myself in some sort of abstraction, uninfluenced by external conditions. One's own personality, you see, is apt to interfere in the work if one is constantly being reminded of it."

"Do you find your work influenced—helped or hampered—by your experience as an actor?"

"That is a big question, and certain things have to be explained before it can be answered. On the one hand, I should say that the dramatist who has been an actor is better able than others to overcome the difficulties of the craft; on the other, too intimate an acquaintance with the theatre and its associations is apt to narrow a man's view of life—to beget mere theatricalism. On the whole, however, practical experience of the actual theatre is of advantage to the playwright. It shows him, if he has eyes to see, that anything can be done on the stage by the man who knows how to do it."

"Yes, the art of the stage is illimitable. I read in some modern criticism of limitations of the stage. But to me there are limitations only of the author's capacity to deal with the technical difficulties of the medium in which he has undertaken to work. Stevenson wrote that drama is falsification of life. That was because he never took pains to acquire the necessary theatrical technique. No! there need not be falsification, though there must be compression. A drama is an epitome; but because a thing is small in bulk it also is not necessarily imperfect. Perfection is not the attribute of size."

"In writing a play do you think of the powers and idiosyncrasies of the actors who are to play in it?"

"No; I try to dismiss from my mind all thoughts of the theatres, of actors and actresses. The theatre is to me then a building only. There is no thought of the individual players until the play is conceived and in great part written."

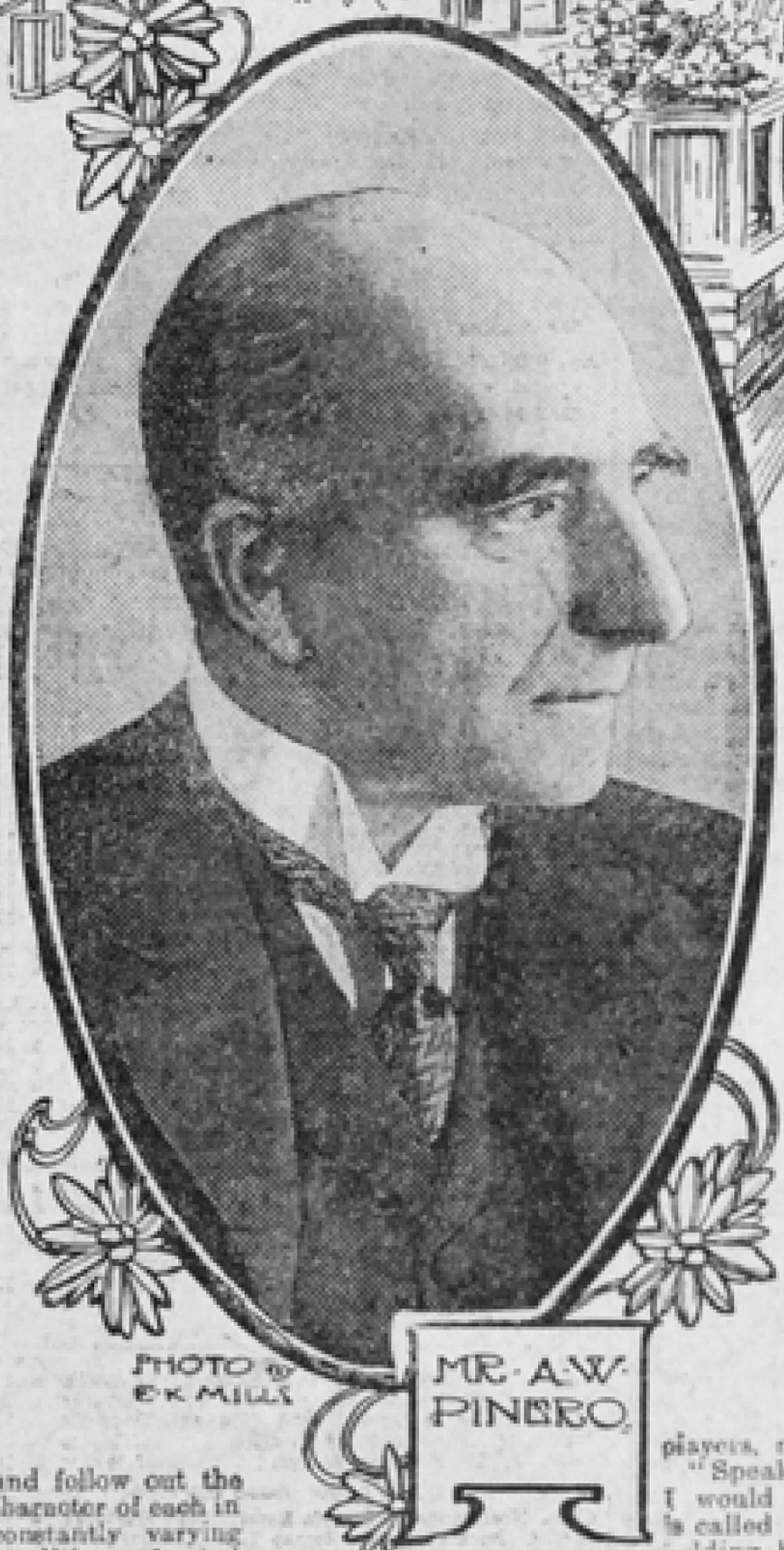


PHOTO BY EK MILLER
MR. A.W. PINERO

At the study window,
"Stillands."

After all, you know, if a writer while doing his work thinks of certain performers he will be all out in his calculations if those special persons do not play it."

"Do you alter much at rehearsal?"

"Never! I never alter anything. All that we call 'business' is in the printed matter which I carry into the theatre. Why should it be altered when it has all been carefully and even laboriously thought out, every detail of it, during the process of construction? The movements of a man and what he has to say are inseparable. Expression is multifarious and simultaneous. To alter one phase is to weaken all. I try to think of these things beforehand. Rehearsal is not—or certainly should not be—a time for experiment. It is to prepare for the acting together of the players, not for the making of the play."

"Speaking to any young writer for the stage, I would caution him against composing what is called a 'rough draft' of the play first and holding himself bound by it. An elaborate scenario is carpenter's work, and belongs to a lower form of composition."

"But is there no received mechanism or formality of thought or method in play-writing?" I asked in order to get him to talk on, not to challenge his statement.

"With every play I write I have to learn afresh the art of playwriting."

"Indeed! Are there, then, no binding principles in this art?"

"There are binding principles, but there are no binding methods. It is the method that I have always to learn afresh!"

"Why? Does each subject regulate its own treatment?"

"Just as in real life no two lives are exactly the same, and cannot be recorded in exactly the same way, so in fiction. Stories of different people, different events, cannot be told with efficacy on a similar plan."

"Am I to take it, then, that there are no sharp edges at the bounds of dramatic art?"

"There are no bounds—except, of course, those to suit the demands of the special case. There are properly no bounds of art at all. And to force the adoption of settled formula would be fatal."

He went to one of the bookcases and took down a quarto volume bound in white vellum. Turning the pages over rapidly, he began to read:

"I don't want to be oracular, but do remember the immutable law of variety. Nature seldom condescends to replicas. You may roam the whole world, as I have, and you won't discover two noses that are absolutely a match."

How much more striking is the diversity when you get under the skin, when you touch disposition, mood, talent!"

"What is that from?" I asked.

"That is the way I tried to put my idea on the subject in 'His House in Order.'"



Mrs. Pinero with her dogs; and the drawing room in Hanover Square.

"Do some themes which suggest themselves prove on trial their own unfitness?"

"Certainly. But that belongs to the conceptive, the experimental, the tentative side of work. You may take it that you can do anything you wish on the stage. But the choice is a matter of your own artistic conscience, in the first place. And in the second place the quantity and quality of your skill in the service."

"By the way, I suppose in play construction there is some sort of rule, just as in building a house, though all the details may vary?"

"Of course there is. There are lots of rules, but most of them can be classed under one head."

"And that?"

"Logic. I am a thorough believer in logic. There is no art without it. The groundwork of a play, as well as of its character, must be logic. Cause—effect! Cause—effect! The pendulum swings between the two. Two of the most substantial parts of the fabric which go to make up a fine play are logic and intuition. Without the first you can't construct a play. Without the second you can't write it!"

"Where does intuition come in?"

"It furnishes the points of view. You, a man, are perhaps writing of a woman, and you must look from her point of view. It was what enabled Shakespeare to create Portia, Beatrice and the rest of his wonderful women. It is understanding, principally."

"Do such parts as those you mention help actors to rise to them?"

"Good parts make good actors. That is, they reveal the powers that are latent or unknown. The parts do not create the powers. A power is, after all, a power, even if it be not conscious."

"You spoke of the pendulum swinging between cause and effect. Does it swing dramatically in any other way? For instance, between comedy and pathos, or tragedy and common-place, or character and hard fact?"

"Not as a method, but only if situation calls for it. There are very often occasions when such contrasts are the perfection of good art and are most effective when they present themselves. But to drag them in is vile. A self-conscious artist is no artist at all!"

"Before we part I want you to say, if you

don't mind, what you think of the progress of American art."

"I say with the greatest pleasure, and quite freely and sincerely, that dramatic art in America is advancing by leaps and bounds."

"The audiences? Oh, to my mind the American audience is the most intelligent in the English-speaking world. I love America and Americans. This I say spite of the fact that I have received from them at times, as I believe, some injustice. Yes, the change in America is what is going on all over the world; the change from classic and romantic drama to naturalism."

"And what is your opinion as to continuous advance?"

"There is no such thing as continuous advance. You must go back occasionally. When a man wants to take a second plunge into the water he has to get out and remount the plunge-board."

"How do you think the new school will be affected by the National Repertoire Theatre that we hear of?"

"I hail it with delight; I only hope the news is true. If its aims and methods justify what we are told, it will render a service to not only American home-grown drama, but to British also. In fact, all drama will benefit. It will help, in my view, to show that there is already in existence a very fine English drama—that is, an English-speaking drama."

"Everything can improve, and will improve. There is nothing to prevent it. I read a great deal about the obstacles put in the way of the creation of good modern drama. But I know of no cause operating against the production of fine modern drama upon the English-speaking stage, except the disinclination or the inability of the modern dramatists to write it!"

Pinero has a habit, perhaps won from his acting days, of unconsciously suiting his action to his words. As he spoke the last paragraph he moved quickly about the room. At the last he put on a pair of heavy gold-rimmed spectacles. It seemed as though he were looking for some of those elusive obstacles.

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