

RADIO

By VALERIE GROVE

Something had to be done about anachronisms in plays set in the recent past.

Recently, I mentioned a 'Don't get me started' and an 'Anytime soon' in a play about the making of the film *Victim*, set in 1959.

'Why don't they ask an oldie?' I wrote.

Well, a radio playwright who is also an old friend, Stephen Wakelam, was writing a Radio 4 play called *Lying Low*, based on a little-known episode in Samuel Beckett's life.

Wakelam excels in dramas about the lives of authors — Tolstoy, Edith Wharton, John Osborne. This one concerns Beckett's wedding to his longtime companion Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil, in 1961, in Folkestone.

For some reason to do with French inheritance law, their wedding had to take place in England. So Samuel Beckett, aged 55, left Paris, crossed the Channel, and checked in at the modest Hotel Bristol as 'Mr Barclay' (his middle name).

One of the two witnesses at the register office was 'J. Bond', and my playwright friend decided to imagine her as Janet, the hotel's part-time receptionist, a sixth-form student aged 17, aiming for Cambridge.

As an aid to verisimilitude, I sent Steve some extracts from my 1961 diary — when I was only 14, but its references show teenage life before the real 1960s got started. A new Wimpy Bar seemed the height of sophistication. The jukebox played Adam Faith.

Steve duly used several such indicators in his play, and invited me to attend the recording at the BBC's Maida Vale studios. I was sorry to miss day one, when Beckett himself was played by the great actor Adrian Dunbar, chairman of the annual Beckett festival at Enniskillen, where Sam went to school.

On day two, I arrived to hear a teacher's voice saying, 'Don't pack your bag just yet, Valerie,' just as a school bell rang. The author had also borrowed my name for a non-speaking part.

What impressed me was the fastidious attention to every detail, by the director Gemma Jenkins and her production team, for this 45-minute afternoon play. Every syllable is listened to intently and re-recorded if not quite right.

With trepidation I suggested that the teacher, handing Janet a copy of *The Listener*, would not say, 'Here you go,' but 'Here you are,' in 1961. A reference to hamburgers was switched to fish fingers.

The pronunciation of Simenon and 'Maigret; the acoustic need to fetch a carpet for a scene at Janet's home; the question of whether the TV would show Sergeant Bilko or PC Dixon at that time of day; all were discussed. At which point, 'You can be over-scrupulous,' said Wakelam. 'I don't mind the occasional green ink letter.'

Judge its chronistic accuracy on 22nd September; or on iPlayer (*sadly no longer available*).

Courtesy of The Oldie