



# Session 1

## Finding Your Story

Why me?

Why now?

Why theatre?

# Key Questions

## What do I feel

About the world I live in; about other people; about particular events, issues or experiences of mine or others?  
What evokes a particular emotion in me that might inspire a story?  
What sort of feelings do I want to evoke in my audience with my play?

## What do I think

About the world I live in; about what I see happening around me socially, culturally, politically, economically?  
What dominant or marginal social beliefs, values and ideas interest me, and why? How might they inspire a story? What sort of ideas might my play test?

## Why do I want to write my play

And what personal interests, experiences, thoughts, feelings, and intentions might inspire my work? What am I keen to communicate to my audience? Why does my story matter to me?

# Playwrights on writing plays



Now watch this short film in which playwrights talk about how they begin to write and what their process is. If you'd like to, you can see Simon Stephens, Polly Stenham and James Graham discuss their work in more detail in this series of short films

Simon Stephens  
Polly Stenham  
James Graham

<http://bit.ly/2wsAWra>  
<http://bit.ly/1naTdQp>  
<http://bit.ly/2c80wY7>

# Discuss This

With who do you generally discuss your feelings and thoughts about your life and the lives of others? (E.g. friends, family, teachers, social forums, etc.)  
Are there certain emotions or opinions you like to share but feel you can't? Might your play be a place where you can articulate some of those feelings and thoughts?

Where do you get your information about the world you live in (or historical 'past' worlds) and might these be a source for your play? (E.g. television news/newspapers/online; films and books; sharing opinions with friends and relatives; memberships of social organisations and groups, etc.)

Can anything be the seed for a story, however small?  
What skills might you need to develop an initial spark of thought or feeling into a play?

In what ways are stories for theatre different from stories for television and film? How do they engage their audience differently?

How can plays strike a balance between presenting ideas and themes to their audience, and arousing their emotions?



Audio clips and written transcripts of a scene from *The Effect* by Lucy Prebble and a scene from *Welcome to Thebes* by Moira Buffini are available. Listen to these or read the transcripts to explore further.

# Discuss This

What's the central story of each of these plays?  
Name a key idea in each scene that you think the writers are interested in exploring  
Name a key emotion in each scene that you think the writers are using to create drama for their characters  
How does each play differ in terms of the world or arena in which the action is set? (E.g. personal/political; intimate/epic; public/private, etc.)

What did you enjoy the most and why?  
Should theatre primarily entertain or educate its audience? Or can/should it do both?  
The director Dominic Dromgoole says that in the theatre, 'The air that vibrates between actors and the audience is full of the dust of the moment.'  
What do you think he means?

### **The Effect by Lucy Prebble**

Premiered at the National Theatre in 2012, the play is set in a medical facility, which is testing a new anti-depressant drug for a pharmaceutical company. Among the volunteers being paid to be monitored under clinical trials are Connie, a psychology student, and Tristan, an unemployed drifter. As the doctors increase their drug dosage, Connie and Tristan find themselves falling in love. But is this love real and authentic, or merely an 'effect' of the mood-enhancing drugs they are taking? As their feelings for each other deepen, the couple attempts to outwit the doctors and the pharmaceutical company by taking matters into their own hands, with disastrous results. The play explores questions of sanity, neurology and the limits of medicine, as well as the power struggle between the individual, medical institutions and commercial drugs companies.

### **Welcome to Thebes by Moira Buffini**

Produced by the National Theatre in 2010 and loosely based on Sophocles' classic tragedy *Antigone*. Set in a contemporary, unnamed African republic destroyed by civil war, the play explores the fragile diplomatic relationship between Eurydice, the new female president of war-torn Thebes, and Theseus, the arrogant ruler of rich and powerful Athens, who has come to offer aid. When Eurydice refuses to sanction the burial of the defeated warlord, Polynices, her action divides political opinion, and the resulting conflict causes fresh violence to explode. The future of Thebes thus hangs in the balance. Moira Buffini's play looks at the ways in which wealth, class and gender divisions impact democracy, and at the power games operating within modern politics.

## **Group Exercise**

Read the scene straight through once or twice using volunteers from the group to read the different roles.

### **Afterwards Discuss This**

- Why do you think Toby, the head of the medical facility, might be excited about the information Dr James reveals here about the drug test results of the two volunteers? What might the implications be for him personally and politically?
- What techniques, skills or tactics does Toby use to try and convince Dr James that it's the drug causing these effects in the volunteers, rather than their own flirtation?
- What techniques, skills or tactics does Dr James use to defend her argument that it isn't the drug causing the effects?
- What skill is the playwright using here to present the argument of the scene? How do you think she wants the audience to respond to either character's argument?
- How is the playwright inviting us to invest in the characters' problems, desires and conflicts?

## **Get Writing**

1. Here is a list of characters who have a particular point they wish to make in service of a specific goal.

An MP making a political address to constituents  
A celebrity making a charity appeal  
A barrister delivering a speech in court in defence of his/her client  
A mother questioning her teenage child about where they stayed last night.

Choose the character from the list who interests you the most. (OR invent your own character.) They will be Character A.

2. Now invent a second character, Character B. They can be anyone you want, but they should fundamentally oppose Character A's main argument. Both Characters A and B want to convince a third party to agree with them. (This third party could be a group, such as the public, or a jury, OR an individual.)

3. Make a list of tactics, tricks, skills or methods your characters use to put their case forward and get what they want. You can model these on some of the same devices used in the scene from *The Effect*.
4. Write two speeches, one by Character A and one by Character B, in which they use their powers of persuasion to influence the third party and get what they want.
5. One of the challenges of writing a play is how to make it theatrical, rather than literary. Long speeches can impart useful information to an audience, but can also be rather dull to watch. Choose one of the speeches you've written, and then think about how you might bring this alive on stage. E.g. Could you use more than one character to present the information in dialogue rather than monologue? How might you make the speech more dynamic or visually dramatic?

## Tips

When you're writing your play, think about not just what your character says but how they say it. Also try to be clear about what outcome your character is aiming for in their speech, whether or not they achieve it. When you're writing your play, think about the tactics characters use to get what they want.



## Find Out More

Interview with David Harewood in the *Guardian* feature  
Portrait of the Artist <http://bit.ly/UQvm9L>.

David Harewood in *New Black Magazine* <http://bit.ly/PVQTL9>

Alexia Khadime on *whatsonstage.com* <http://bit.ly/16hRjk5>.

*Afridiziak* <http://bit.ly/dmSJWd>.

Richard Eyre in the *Evening Standard*  
<http://bit.ly/QCoSqS>.

Madeline Appiah in *Afridiziak*  
<http://bit.ly/SvAO2p>.

Article about the black actor boom in *Evening Standard* <http://bit.ly/NP0Trp>.

Article about *Welcome to Thebes* in the *New Black Magazine*  
<http://bit.ly/OSf408>.

The History of *Othello* at the National Theatre  
<http://bit.ly/2bRymo1>

## Suggestions For Further Reading

*Elmina's Kitchen* by Kwame Kwei Armah

*Pentecost* by David Edgar

*Power* by Nick Dear

*The Clink* by Stephen Jeffreys

*Posh* by Laura Wade

*Blue/Orange* by Joe Penhall

*The Crucible* by Arthur Miller

*My Country* by Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris

*Deposit* by Matt Hartley

*Ink* by James Graham

*Finding Your Story* by Bola Agbaje

*Gone Too Far!* by Bola Agbaje

*An Adventure* by Vinay Patel