



Session 8

Starting to Write

Provocation

What/Who/When/Where/Why

Key Concepts

What/Who/When/Where/Why Writing is, at heart, about making choices

WHAT is the play about?

- Do you have a clear subject matter, theme or issue, you want to explore or debate?
- Are there oppositions or antitheses within the play to drive the drama?
- Is there any research you can do to help focus your ideas?

WHO is the play about?

- Do you have a single protagonist, an antagonist or a wider constellation of characters?
- Whose point of view will guide the story or will it be a multiple-person narrative?

WHEN is the play set?

- What historical period is it set in?
- Over what period of time does the action take place?
- Will it unfold in linear time or have a more elastic time frame?
- How will you structure your play to help create a clear narrative for your audience?

WHERE is the play set in time and space?

- Where will you situate your scenes?
- How will you establish a dramatic, visual or metaphorical world for the play?

WHY do you want to write this play?

- What are you keen to communicate to your audience?

Tips

It's not necessary to know the answers to all the questions above in precise detail before starting to write – there will always be room for discovery as you write your first draft. However, the more planning you do before you begin, and the more you can crystallize your creative, intellectual and theatrical intentions, the better chance you will have of getting to the end.

Discuss This

It's the playwright's job try to provoke their audience politically and/or personally. That's what the theatre is for. What do you think?

Group Exercise

Listen to the audio clip of *England People Very Nice* by Richard Bean.

A riotous journey through four waves of immigration from the 17th century to today. As the French Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews and the Bangladeshis in turn enter the chaotic world of Bethnal Green, each new influx provokes a surge of violent protest over housing, jobs, religion and culture. And the emerging pattern shows that white flight and anxiety over integration is anything but new. Richard Bean's play takes an uncomfortable look at racial stereotypes and the fears about multiculturalism of a dominant white culture. In this scene, the playwright satirizes the stereotypes associated with Irish immigrants, as part of a wider provocation about British attitudes towards ethnicity.

1. After you've listened to the scene, discuss this

- How and why does the writer deliberately set out to provoke his audience in this play? How do you feel after listening to the scene?
- What do you think the writer is trying to say? What questions is he trying to raise?
- How does he use his theatrical form to create a context for the audience to understand his message?
- Do you think there are certain subject matters that should not be put on stage at all and/or handled in certain way? If so, why?
- Is the writer responsible for the audience's reaction to his/her work? Should a writer try to predict how their play will be received?

Start writing your play

1. Spend some time thinking about the play you want to write with reference to the WHO/WHAT/WHY/WHERE/WHEN breakdown. Try to write a few words for each category, even if your ideas are still vague.
2. When you've brainstormed some thoughts about the general scope of your play, try to formulate them into a sentence that contains a provocation.

Example

My play is set in Leeds and takes place in the present. It's about what happens when a disgraced British soldier who has been fired from duty in Afghanistan and an Afghan illegal immigrant go up for the same job in the UK. The provocation I want to raise is who has the greater right to the job?

3. Then try to work your way through the following exercises. It's easier for you to work with a single character in mind. If your play contains more than one protagonist, choose one for the purpose of the exercise. You can always repeat the exercises using other key characters in the future.

Write a speech

made by one of your characters which shows them trying to convince somebody else to accept their point of view. Think about the value inherent in that point of view. The higher the value, the easier it will be to write.

Write a detailed description of one of your key characters to include their

PHYSIOLOGY (gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, a basic description of appearance, to include any physical tics, mannerisms, ways of speaking, etc.)

SOCIOLOGY (nationality, childhood and upbringing, education, employment history, social environment, income bracket, marital status, etc.)

PSYCHOLOGY (personality traits, aspirations, fears, weaknesses, talents, values and beliefs, etc.)

Make a list of key incidents

from the past, present or future life of this character. Do any of these incidents have the potential to act as a trigger for action in your play? Is there a link between an action that happened in their childhood and an action they might take as an adult? Think about the relationship between these triggers. What might they set in motion?

Isolate a goal, need, value or problem

your character has. Then formulate this into a sentence that includes a 'BUT clause.'

Example - *Tom, a British soldier who fought in Iraq, wants to rejoin the army BUT... he was given a dishonourable discharge / he has an injury that prevents him / his wife won't let him... etc.* This may help you find areas in a character's life where there is tension, conflict, antithesis and the potential for drama.

Write a brief outline

(a paragraph is fine) for at least THREE scenes in your play (they don't have to be consecutive scenes.) Each outline should include a specific setting, time and place, a list of characters, and a basic description of the action of the scene.

Each of the three scenes should have a specific and different dramatic function, as outlined below

- **BEGINNING SCENE** A scene that sets something up. It could be a meeting, an introduction, the establishment of a goal, desire, problem or conflict. It may contain a trigger or inciting incident that kick-starts the story.
- **MIDDLE SCENE** A scene that contains a negotiation or conflict, possibly over a treasure – i.e. something of economic, personal or symbolic value which two or more people are competing for. The dramatic stakes should be high for one or more of the characters.
- **ENDING SCENE** A scene that provides some sort of resolution. This could be a reconciliation, a battle won, a crisis, a departure... something which provides closure for one or more of the characters.

Write a paragraph that describes the theatrical world of your play.

This could include a description of scene locations, stage settings, props, costumes, visual themes or motifs, use of music or other audio-visual effects. Think about the physical atmosphere you would like to create in your play on stage and how this relates to the form and style you would like to explore.

vii. Come back to the central provocation you isolated in the group exercise, and try to come up with at least one **visual or linguistic metaphor** that might symbolically represent the provocation. This could be something as simple as a character name, a title for the play, a prop, a setting, a recurring line of dialogue, or a visual motif.

Extension Exercise



Listen to the audio clip of *Protest Song* by Tim Price.

Danny sleeps rough on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral. Has done for years. Then one morning he wakes to see a canvas city being erected in front of him. And Danny finds himself swept up in the last occupation of London. Tim Price's funny and savage monologue explores the reality of the Occupy movement.

After you've listened to the scene, discuss this

What are the provocations in this play?

How is the audience challenged to question their own attitudes and beliefs?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of limiting your play to one character?

Discuss how the theatrical effect of this play differs from the Richard Bean play. Which do you prefer and why?

What do the plays have in common, despite their huge differences in style, scale and form?



Find Out More

Rhys Ifans interview <http://bit.ly/1vS7Kmu>

Suggestions for Further Reading

Salome by Oscar Wilde

The Goat by Edward Albee

Oleanna by David Mamet

The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter

Blasted by Sarah Kane

Behzti by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti

Corpus Christi by Terrence McNally

Saved by Edward Bond

Pomona by Alistair McDowall