

**Transcription**  
**Open Submissions Workshop #9: Can Playwriting Be A Science? with Meghan Tyler**

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**Video (with closed captions):** https://youtu.be/45-GPsNOWBg

[♪ Gentle electronic music]

Hello everyone. People of Earth. My name is Megan Tyler and I'm a playwright actor theatre makin' person. And I'm here today to just sort of talk to you about playwriting, In a way that might be a bit strange but bear with me, I think it'll be fun.

I hope that everyone's okay at home. I know it's been absolutely mad with this lockdown. It's been a really scary time for everyone involved in the arts, if you're a recent graduate or if you're trying to apply to drama school, or if you're trying to get your writing built up I know that you're like 'what is the point?’. But trust me theatre doesn't die and we will be back. And hopefully, this workshop will give you a little bit of something.

And so my premise for this workshop is, can playwriting be a science? I know there'll be people start at home going, 'What, what have you taken? What are you on?’. No, you need to pour your heart into it, you need to bleed, you need to weep, you need to be raging with yourself, you need to loathe yourself. I know I've done all that but sometimes you can't do that, sometimes life gets in the way, sometimes a bloody pandemic gets in the way and you're prevented from giving your utmost self to everything you need to do for playwriting.

So this, since Crocodile Fever happened I've thought a lot about the dynamics of playwriting. I’ve thought about how it could maybe be degraded into equations. Now this is just a thesis that I'm still working, on this is a hypothetical workshop that I think will just open up some cracks, that will open up some new ideas for you guys to look at your plays and to see them in a new light and not drive your mental health like up the walls for a play, do you know? And so this is my theory, can playwriting be a science? And I actually think I'm onto something. So let's start.

We all thought we'd left maths behind let’s say at GCSE level but I think it can really help you guys like structure your play. If you've got a 45-minute play you are wanting those first four or five minutes, four or five pages to really introduce your characters. You'll want your audience to sort of get a feel of who they're dealing with and then about page six is when an inciting incident happens. Either that's a gun, that's something that a character does that maybe other characters aren't aware of that the audience are like, 'oh, oh my, here we go now.’ If you've got an hour and a half play that usually happens around like page 10. And with like a two-and-a-half-hour play that usually happens around page 13, 14. These are sort of the rules, the mathematical rules, that I've sort of noticed and taken in having gone to see theatre and writing theatre. I know I definitely have written lots of plays where the inciting incident didn't happen to a bloody page 30. And it was like, why are they just talking? No one's interested in that! Action. The more action you can get the better.

The second part of this in terms of structure, is if we track two very, very basic sort of types of theatre say like comedy and tragedy and we put them on a graph, so if this is your like duration of the play and this is like positive vibes/bad vibes You know, basically a comedy, those first 10 pages will start off quite comedic, they'll introduce your character there'll be some positive vibes. And then an inciting incident that will happen and then it should go down. Like a comedy, the funny thing about comedy is what's funny is tragedy. What an audience laughs at is tragedy. Yes, it's heightened and its comedic but an audience laughs a tragedy. so you follow follow, follow, follow, follow that down until your ending Where it should be a big sort of triumphant, comedic, everybody gets lols together, kind of thing.

With the tragedy, now if you look at plays like Streetcar Named Desire or Romeo and Juliet, a tragedy sort of follows like a comedy for a long period of time because the thing is, an audience wants to laugh. And if you just sort of hit them, hit them, hit them with all these tragic things over and over and over again it's gonna be too much, whereas if you manage to hit them get them with laughs give them a bit of comedy they'll feel for the characters more. And that means by your interval or by your midway point, which Kieran Hurley says really well in Mouthpiece, you've hit a point of hope by the midpoint. By the midpoint, you should hit a point that the audience feels 'oh my gosh this seems great’. And then it takes the trajectory down. And then by that stage you've got your audience on side with your structure and you can lead them into that really sad - I'm thinking of Tennessee Williams, I'm thinking of Streetcar, post the point of Blanche's birthday, it just gets worse and worse and worse. Of course there's ways of breaking that and I implore you to break these rules because where would we be without breaking rules? But for a simple structure, I think mathematically these are good things to think of.

Yes, language as maths. Now, I know from personal experience that maths and English - they shouldn't, they don't normally - But they do. If we go way, way, way, way, way back to Shakespeare's time he practically gave the audience who a character was, utilising maths. If you take a Shakespeare character you can put them on this breakdown of their language that shows you how many nouns they say, how many verbs they say, how many adjectives they say. On top of this you can also see how many times they say 'you' and how many times they say ‘I'. Now this might not seem like a lot but from doing Shakespeare in the past and studying Shakespeare quite a bit, if you've got a character who uses lots of nouns they're normally quite a practical quite a matter-of-fact, kind of this is this and that is that kind of person. If you've got someone who's using lots and lots of verbs, more so than the others, that's a person of action, that's a doer that's someone who's like fuelling the play along. If you've got someone who uses a lot of adjectives, they are a little bit flowery, might be a wee bit romantic. But they're also not that trustworthy.

The power of how much you use your nouns, verbs and adjectives in a percentage sense can tell your audience about your character without you spoon-feeding them. Also the amount your character says 'you' or ‘I' tells you if they're more self-involved, or if they're like a giver if they're someone who thinks about someone else. And you can do that with the audience's ear using the percentage of your language, which I think is great.

The second thing of that - Oh no, I really do I just think it's amazing that you can like divide your scripts based on your characters percentage-wise into what they say. If you want to say that someone is a bastard have them use 'I' all the time and have them talking this flowery adjective bit. If you want someone who's you know, a go-getter, verbs - verbs! Because it just says to the audience - oh, oh, oh.. It's such a good little trick to use.

Now the second part of this, aside from this, is how you can use percentages for your themes in a play. Now if you've got lots of themes that you want to hit on in your plays, it sometimes might be a bit like 'oh how do I get this in here with like feeling like I'm just like wedging it in?’ Again, percentages can be your best friend. [LAUGHS] So sometimes you hear yourself - but they can be! Basically, if you've got like five or six themes and you're looking at your play and you're like 'How do I rejuvenate this? I've got things that I want to hit on but I'm not sure how to do that.’ I'm gonna tell you how so with Crocodile Fever one thing I learned was let's say crocodiles, that's a big theme in Crocodile Fever. It’s in the title, don't know if you guys know but! Basically I did a huge mind map of all the words associated with crocodile and that was like swamp, crawl, claws, teeth, all these different words. At the same time in Catholicism is really a big theme in Crocodile Fever so again went through was like, holy water, exorcism, just - then went back and sat through my play and it was a simple as, instead of a character saying he's really got a hold of you. He's really got his claws into you. It's just again giving the audience your theme in a sort of trixey way without you spelling it out what's gonna happen. And by the end of that, if you're reading through and if you have a list of all your themes you feel are really important for your play, just do a little sort of checklist, how many times you hear that theme how many times you hear that particular theme and if it's too little all it takes it's a simple word change here or there, just be inventive with it.

Now the third thing on this is how your characters interact with each other. Now as a basic thing for early playwrights, I would say that that there's a tendency to sort of - between a back and forth of characters say - You said this, I said that, you said this. And it gets a bit, ooft. Here's a wee way to sort of reinvent - start your sentence with either a noun and then the next person an adjective, and the next person the verb. Or have an 'I', have a question and then have a completely different like ball throw in throw ball, no? That's not the word. You get what I mean. If you change up the starts of your sentences, it again just lifts your play, it just rejuvenates it and gives it more depth for the audience's ear.

Now we've started talked about the start of sentences, this also applies to the end of a sentence. You want the end of a sentence to really be the most important word. What's the most important word in there? That is the word with the most wit, make that the end because that's the last word from that character that the audience is going to hear.

The science of characters. Now if we were to think of two magnets, sometimes magnets go OOP and sometimes magnets go ZOOMP. That's kind of what we're looking for on stage. If you think of two characters that just repel each other that's really interesting to watch. If you think of two characters that are very much attracted to each other and kind of like bounce off each other that is again interesting to watch. It's entertaining as an audience. A step up from that is - let me take you back to the periodic table of elements. Now if you guys remember chemistry and don't know if you remember doing the thing, you had this and yes just sprinkled on a tiny little thing and it went like WHOOMP right on fire. And some of it was quite explosive some of it god damn near dangerous but you know you're 14 so whatever. That's kind of what we're looking for with our characters. If you've got someone who's quite repressed or neutral or quite - they're not very reactionary, chuck in that character who is an element that is element that is gonna make them explode. Chuck in a character that's gonna make them melt. Chuck in different characters that they're gonna react to. You want opposition's in there, you want explosions in there, you want dynamics in there. If you think of the periodic table of elements with your characters, you can unlock so many different reactions. If you've got just like sort of two neutral elements and you throw them together it's not gonna be very interesting to watch. We in science lessons sat there and went, meh. The same can be said of theatre we want to be excited, we want to be entertained.

On that, the sort of third point with this, the sort of science of characters think about the elements of the situation. I'm talking about the outer elements now, I'm talking about weather. Think of the atmosphere, the elements that you're putting your characters into because if you think of how you are on a rainy day of it's pissin it down with rain that completely changes the dynamics that you have with people. If it's a really warm day people get a wee bit more ragin’, easily people lose their temper a bit more. If it's snowing, you're freezing cold everything's gonna be a bit more restricted and a wee bit more sharp. Really look at the atmosphere that you're setting your characters up in

Because that in terms of biology changes us. And that can be another thing that you can do, if you're a bit stuck on a play just chuck in what the weather's doing outside and you can unlock a lot with your characters.

Now I know myself I find redrafts quite daunting sometimes. You sort of land at the end of your play and go 'ah, here you go!’ And then you get it back and you go 'Oh my god I hate myself. Why have I done this? 'How could I be so, so foolish?” We have to get rid of that mentality because that mentality is not healthy for us. We need to start looking at redrafts as experiments. Now when scientists are doing this experiment and that experiment and this experiment they're not sat there on number one going 'Oh I've got it, I've cracked it. No I haven’t.' Because they're gonna do an experiment like a hundred and twenty million times to reach the result that they wanted to. The same is true of plays. If you're beating yourself over a redraft, don't do it. It's an experiment. You’re experimenting what will happen with your characters in their situation and that's important to remember because you shouldn't beat yourself up too much between one draft and the next.

With every redraft introduce a new thing I would say. Introduce a new thing and see what that does to the characters. Now, that in terms of the equations of a redraft, introducing the new thing might make it all completely fall apart, introducing a new thing might completely unlock it. Introducing the new thing might give you a nice little pepper of something but it's not really necessary. But the more that you do these experiments the more that you get to know your characters, the more that you get to know your world and that's how you'll present your final play.

So thanks for coming to my science lesson, I hope that you guys got a lot out of it. I hope that you guys can sort of look at your scripts, look at your drafts and go, 'Oh, oh I can - that's how I can get my theme in, or that character need to be a bit more this’ and I can utilize or - like my an inciting incident isn't at page 10 I found it all the way back at page 40. I'll take that back.

I hope that that has given you some more tools, a wee bit more of a toolkit. Not just a passionate artistic toolkit to work from as you go forward in your beautiful writing.

Now here are just some final tips that I've sort of picked up over the years, that I think will help. Basically, go big or go home. We've seen all the plays with people sitting down, yes, Chekov did it very well, people sitting down and discussing the thing that'd the thing. [INAUDIBLE] We don't really need any more of those! I'd say if you've got a bold idea, go for the bold idea, we need more of that in theatre. We've got the cinema and TV to compete with my fellas. Like we need to be like yas theatre! Be bonkers.

Number two on that, I've just said fellas shouldn't have said fellas that wasn't inclusive but everyone says fellas I'm from Ireland. Number two, do not write a play full of men for the stage. We are so bored of plays full of men on the stage I do not want to sit down and watch 'oh there's one straight white man and there's another atraight white man, oh there's a third straight white man.’ Oh, this is it? This is the play? Great. We're bored of it now, there are a million and one different types of human beings to base your plays off of

Number three trust your own rhythms. everyone has an internal rhythm and if you write that internal rhythm on a page, your audience will come together as an internal rhythm, have the same heartbeat and be with your play. If you write with your own rhythms and I mean, it does take it takes time to find out what it is. I know myself I emulated a lot of playwrights like I emulated Samuel Beckett for a very, very, very, very, very long time. And that sort of got me in a rhythm and then I broke away from that and I started finding my own rhythm. That's what you can do as well. Trust your rhythms they're there. Trust yourself.

And thank you for listening to my workshop. I hope that this has been enlightening for people. Just stay safe and stay sane and give loadsa kindness out into the world. And really, really best of luck if you're applying to Open Submissions.

[♪ Gentle electronic music]