

**Transcription**
**Open Submissions Workshop #10: What Is Said and What Is Not Said with Oliver Emanuel**

**Audio file location:** https://open.spotify.com/episode/7I26nAYRJpX5lLHBx3f6FG?si=jtX1i1wiSpau1-ku5xbCeQ

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

[♪ Gentle electronic music]

Hello, welcome. My name is Oliver Emanuel and I'm a playwright. I've been asked by the Traverse Theatre to do a workshop for you today as part of their Open Submissions Workshop series. I think you hopefully will have seen a number of those different workshops by some of my brilliant colleagues and I'm really excited today to talk to you about dramatic tension. Dramatic tension!

So, the format for today is that I will do some talking, there will be some exercises along the way, and at the end there'll be a sort of reflection. Please feel free to stop the video at any point. Take your time. Don't feel you have to get through all of it. I will be holding up my digital watch different points to give you the exact timings because obviously, this is a precise timepiece. But you can obviously take your time, as much as you like.

So today's workshop is about dramatic tension, what is said and what is not said. Or another way of putting this is subtext. The goal of today is that you have a better understanding of the inner workings of dramatic tension so that you can apply it to your own work. It's about understanding how a scene works, creating dynamic characters with clear desires and tactics and writing scenes that are full of tension.

Subtext! I'm obsessed with subtext, with what sits underneath the words the characters say in a play. I sometimes think, or maybe my therapist would tell me this, that it is due to my upbringing in the south of England, where no one really says what they mean. So when they say, Oh! Isn't this a lovely day? What they really mean is, I hate you and I want you to die. But anyway, subtext is sort of not just the words or what is underneath the words but sometimes it's the silence, it's the gaps around language. And for me, subtext is a large part of what makes a play alive. It's quite a technical and tricky part of playwriting but it's how a seemingly banal conversation can become electric. And it's what keeps an audience guessing, learning, leaning forward in their seats and wanting to know what happens next.

So we're going to do a wee exercise now, which I'm going to film in my dining room. And then before we come back to this and what I want you to do is, I want you to get a piece of paper and a pen and make notes about what you can see, whether it be stories or characters or tensions, or anything that kind of occurs to you as you watch this. Just as a warning, some people find this exercise uh, pretty weird! But other people enjoy it but we'll see how you feel. Okay, here we go.

Hello! Just stopping in here to say that we had to remove the music from this next exercise because of copyright. Uh my mistake, very silly! So while you're listening to this next clip, I want you also to listen to Summer Number One, which is Max Richter's a recomposed version of Vivaldi's Four Seasons. If you don't the exercise won't make much sense, unfortunately. We've linked a playlist with the song below. Hopefully, you've got the music ready? Great, let's get back to the exercise.

LINK TO SONG GOES HERE

Okay, uh there we go! Thanks for watching and I hope you enjoyed those stories or maybe you saw one story, an epic journey or battle between uh lots of different fruit. But having a look over your notes now, what really sort of sings out to you? How were the tensions defined? Was it by size or the number of the characters, or was it by position? And whatever the case hopefully, what you've noticed is that an awful lot of story was conveyed just by the visual picture. And this comes back to something I feel like I only realised quite a few years into my playwriting career, that theatre is a visual medium. In fact, it's - Alan Ayckbourn defined it as 50% visual. And I think it's at least 50%. I mean I wrote a play called Dragon a few years ago which was entirely visual, it had no words at all. And I think it's really important to notice that sometimes the way a character moves can tell us just as much as the dialogue.

So what is dramatic tension? Like let's just pin it down, let’s give ourselves a definition, that moving forward through today and also moving forward, you can get a real clear sense of what it is and how to use it. My definition is actually the title of this workshop, which is, what is said versus what is not said. Or another way of putting it, what is done versus what is not done. What I want versus what you want. Dramatic tension is the competing desires of either two characters or even two parts of the same character. So that all sounds quite technical but we will unpack it, so don't worry! So what are the elements of dramatic tension? What are the things that we should be looking out for? At this point in the workshop if we were together, I would hand out a piece of paper with a scene on it and we would read it all together and we'd sort of make notes all over it

But seeing as we can't do that, seeing as it's just you there and me here, I’m gonna read a bit of my play The Monstrous Heart which was on at the Traverse last year. And then I'm gonna break it down and we're gonna talk a little bit about the elements of dramatic tension. So, just to set the scene this is a play about a mother and daughter coming to together after a number of years, having not seen each other for ages. The play is set in a cabin, Mag's cabin, on a Canadian mountain. And beth has just arrived when the play opens. As the scene opens - um I don't give any stage directions as to where they are but what I would say is in the middle of the room there is a big dead bear. That's all I'm going to say. So there's a mother and a daughter, one of them's in their 50s and one of them in their early 30s. And this is their first conversation. And there is quite a lot of bad language in this just so you know that's the case. I'm going to say the character's name and then read their dialogue and I'm also going to read any stage directions that there are. I promise it won't be long. But I also promise i won't do any acting, I'm just going to read it so you can hopefully get a sense of what it is.

Beth: why would anyone want to get closer to nature? What's that about? Nature is a fucker. It's cruel, vindictive. Nature will give you cancer, burn your house down then send a flood to wash away your family. I like the city. I like bright lights, concrete. I find pavements comforting. I don't have a lot of nightmares. I mostly sleep very well despite what you might imagine. But when I do have a nightmare it's always in the country, or by the sea, or up a hill. I wouldn't say no to a cup of tea.

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Silence.

Mag: Beth.

Beth: Tea?

Silence.

Mag: Beth.

Beth: Oh shit, do you have tea in Canada? You're not one of those countries that only does fucking coffee are you?

Mag: Beth.

Beth: If I'd known I would have brought a box of Tetley.

Silence.

Nice place this, cozy. (She sniffs.) What’s that funny smell?

Mag: Smell?

Beth: There's a smell, a shit smell.

Mag: It doesn't smell of anything.

Beth: It stinks.

Mag: No.

Beth: Like wood, a tree what's that tall tree called with the leaves?

Mag: Oak?

Beth: The other one.

Mag: Beech, yew, chestnut, pine...

Beth: Pine that's it!

Mag: The cabin is made of it.

Beth: Aye, same as they're using the toilet. This place stinks like a toilet.

Silence.

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Okay, I'm going to stop there. Apologies for the acting or not acting...

So, what are the elements of subtext there? Because that scene is full of subtext and dramatic tension. How I break it down is very simple, so what is each character saying? What is Beth saying?

Beth is talking about nature and living in the country and talking about wanting cup of tea. And the smell of the room. But what does she really want? What's her intention? And the next element is, what does she do? Is there anything that she does? There are no stage directions in that moment so we'll just take it that she's standing still. Wherever she is in the room she's standing still there's her, there's the dead bear and there's her mother, that's it. And then this is the thing, this is the subtext. Which is what do they - what does the character think? What does the character feel? What I hope you notice here is that much of the subtext, much of the drama is created by what they say and what they do. The juxtaposition of those two things. What is suggested beneath the main action? Is she pleased to see her mother? Is this a loving reunion? Or is there something problematic going on underneath? So have think now and you know imagining that you had your own fruit bowl with you, if you were to stage this scene using fruit, how would you do it?

Now i'm sure in the other workshops that you've done, people have talked a lot about character. And character is key for different elements of drama whether that be story, or texture or whatever. And in terms of dramatic tension character is also key, the key to any dramatic scene is exciting and interesting characters. But what makes a good and interesting character? For me, whenever I'm writing what I'm really trying to do and I said this to a director the other day, which is that in a way, I'm trying to give the audience a sense of the characters to such an extent they feel like they know them better than their best friend by the end of the play. That in a sense, the journey of the play is a journey into the character. Into their heart and the only purpose of a play is to reveal character.

But how do you create those characters? [INAUDIBLE] There are there are hundreds of books written about this really like how do you define character? Some writers I know write 50 facts about a character before they start writing them, some of them write long biographical monologues. There are hundreds of ways of doing it but just to break it down to make it simple as possible for you. I think of character in three key ways, so a character is defined as a desire, an obstacle and then the tactics to overcome those. So just to repeat that the elements of character are, desire - I want. The obstacle being a but. And the tactics are so, so for example, my name is Olly. I want to rob a bank. But I'm a playwright with no discernible skills at bank robbery. And I don't have a fast car. So I get my friend Danny who's got a criminal past and an amazing car to help me out. So you see there's a want, there is an obstacle which is my own inability to rob banks

And then there is tactics and whether that works out or not is going to be the source of the drama. Now dramatic tension is created when two characters have different desires and different tactics. So, for example, my friend Danny, who I invented in this example, might not want to help me and might be trying to play it straight. He might even be wanting to get into drama. He might be watching this workshop. So he might not want to help me and that is where the competing tensions, the competing dramatic tensions will start to play out.

So let's do an exercise now, let's try something to create our own dramatic tension. And don't necessarily use this on a on a play that you're already writing, let's start on a fresh page. Let's just use this as an exercise this is a workout for dramatic tension. So I want you to either rewind and look at the fruit play again, or to get yourself two pieces of fruit in your kitchen. I’m sure you have fruit, you're very healthy. Very important to stay healthy both during lockdown but as obviously as a writer. And I want you to get two pieces of fruit give each a name, a desire and a tactic or a sort of general characteristic that they might employ to get what they want. And I want you to write the first page of a new play, it can be set anywhere. I would go for something low-key but with suggestions of hints and conflicts and tensions. Think about how silence and pauses and movement could work in the scene and maybe bring in something that makes this day different from other days. What does - why does the story start there? So this a tip from me as a writer to you, is that real character is only really revealed when they're put under pressure. So it's your job as a playwright to put your characters in trouble or force them to make choices. And in this in this exercise, we're just going to sort of slightly just apply a little bit of pressure. And I'm going to give you, with my digital casio watch, three minutes to write this scene. Ready, steady, okay! And that's halfway through. 10 seconds. There we go, bang on three minutes.

[Take 3 minutes to complete the exercise]

So sometimes the best way to work out what the underlying desire or the tension might be with a character is, to actually write the subtext and this is something that I do with almost all of my plays.

So the thing to do is choose first of all choose your main character or your protagonist and write a statement or list that begins: I want. Let your character be as open and as honest as you possibly can be, don't censor yourself. Imagine this is a secret diary entry or a confession to a priest. Let it be as private as you possibly can but whatever you do make it important. Now there's no rush on this, I'm not going to time this one so this is just something that you do in your own time. You can pause the video whatever you like, just just start with 'I want'.

The second statement that you need to make is how they are feeling, beginning 'I feel’. And the third and final one is, make a list of possible actions that your character could perform. Now once you've done that with your first character; I want, I feel and possible actions, Do it again with the other character, take as long as you like. The important thing here is to make sure that you're really clear about the central desire. And feelings of your character.

So has anything surprising happened in your list? Have you generated any sort of new ideas? Is what they want important enough, could it be more important? With the information that you've now got, you can choose to either rewrite your scene or rewrite the play that you're already working on with the information you now have about the characters. If it helps, maybe you need to set it somewhere else. Whatever you do, what you're trying to do is raise the tension, raise the temperature in the room.

Checking back over what we've done, it's worth thinking about how dramatic tension works. What the elements of it are; I want, the character, their tactics, their obstacles. Think about what is said and what is not said it's also we're saying that whatever the subtext is at the beginning of the play needs to have been revealed needs to become text by the end of the play. So if we think back to the example I gave early on, if Olly really wants to rob a bank at the beginning of the play by the end, he needs to have either achieved that and rob the bank, or not achieve that and so not robbed the bank. Whatever you start off as a desire needs to be revealed throughout the play. So hopefully you've got a deeper understanding of what a dramatic tension can be the question you really need to ask yourself is how your understanding of subtext, might help you approach your next play and whatever you're doing next. You need to think about the way in which the tension can be raised in your scene because in the end, it's as I said right in the beginning, it's what keeps us as an audience interested.

Thanks so much for watching this video i hope it was helpful and useful. And best of luck with your play. Cheers!

[♪ Gentle electronic music]