

**Transcription**
**Open Submissions Workshop #12: Representing Working-Class Voices with Debbie Hannan & Nessah Muthy**

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**Video (with closed captions):** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6s62J1ik4Ro&list=PLoGlS7Skuvw0ZCPCw2z799TEcOGoy-duC&index=12>

[♪ Gentle electronic music]

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Hello! My name is Debbie Hannan. I'm a theatre director and today as part of the Open Submissions series of workshops, I'm speaking to Nessah. Pass over to you Nessah.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Hi! Thank you Debbie. I'm Nessah Muthy and I am a freelance playwright and screenwriter.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Nessah and I have worked together a lot, for like a long time [LAUGHS] How long? Years. Ten years. Oh no, seven years.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Seven years, the lucky number. We both sung Frozen together in John Lewis. The most working-class thing I've said in my life.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Hilariously the most middle-class shop that's ever existed. Yeah, Nessah and I have known each other for seven years. We've worked together, on and off and a lot of our relationship as a writer and director has been based around speaking about and making work about, working-class identity. And in fact, doing work within the industry to make it more class diverse. So today we are very naturally speaking about class and playwriting.

And just want to say that although today we're going to talk a lot about particularly working-class identity. That we're really aware that there is a series of other class identities that often get amalgamated into that umbrella and get kind of washed away in terms of nuance. And so there are things like benefits class, underclass, criminal class and there are artists who identify as that out there because it is specific to their lived experience. So some of the chat today and the exercises we have will apply to those things because they are intersectional their shared lived experiences kind of across all of those. But we also acknowledge that we will miss things out because we are speaking particularly from a working-class lens because of both our backgrounds and the work that we've done so.

I think it's really useful and probably a good headline for the workshop in terms of specificity around that stuff and also that we are not gospel. We are just two artists who make plays. Nessah is like yes we are.

[LAUGHS]

NESSAH MUTHY:

I am. [THEY LAUGH] I am Jesus.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

That's why I thought I'd get you on. [THEY LAUGH] We're two artists who make stuff, who acknowledge the specificity of our take on it. There is so much more but hopefully what we'll talk about today, which is a lot about native practice as a writer. And then we’ll do some exercises that will be able to inspire particularly working-class writers who are wondering how to start writing, or in the middle of writing, or how to add to their writing, hopefully, this can feed all of that. So Nessah, do you want to speak a bit about how - I mean this is the biggest question - how class affects your writing?

NESSAH MUTHY:

I guess it affects my writing in every single way imaginable. Because a long time ago I made this sort of like a manifesto for myself, I guess for want of a better word. That I would only ever write or put centre stage or centre screen working-class women of colour. Yeah so I've basically set that up for myself because I wanted to- when we were in an age of perhaps less activism and I wanted to find a way to actively change the landscape in a small way, I guess in that respect. But also it's literally about, I think you said this to me once Debbie, I don't think your hand can write another story. Not in like a closing down sort of way - that's all you can write

It's just what comes from you. It is, yeah. And I think that's even if I write a character that isn't working-class, if they're from a middle-class background, I'm still doing it through the lens of how I've perceived them or received them as a working-class person. And I'm going to talk a bit more about this later but for me, it is also about rhythms of language and how people speak and the way in which they order words. So there's that aspect I guess, also, it's about the things that I watched growing up

I wasn't taken to the theatre. If you said to my granddad or my mum, you know the National Theatre they wouldn't know what that was. Even now my granddad’s devastated and never forgave me that I never took the job in Marks and Spencers. Which was never on the table but anyway! I grew up watching soaps essentially and certainly full of particularly matriarchal working-class women and they were hugely, hugely influential. You know I remember like Eastenders having a story when Kat Slater's daughter, a big spoiler alert - what everyone thought was her sister but was actually her daughter. And that being like a really seismic moment in the wider world. I think I recognised very early on that soap is super powerful, it reaches such a huge - in a democratic way because it's literally in your houses or your home. And it reaches so many people. And again another example is Coronation Street when Sarah-Louise was 13 years-old and I think this country had a massive teenage pregnancy rate at that time and she was 13 years old or 14 and pregnant. And that was talked about in parliament. So I think from a young age I sort of had an activist element to it that was so tied up in watching working-class men and women but largely with women's stories and characters for me that hold up those shows. And similarly again, you know, the one thing we did go to was the pantomime. So that you know a very celebratory and it was part of like a, you know a treat package. I mean not that my nan and grandad sort of framed it that way you know it was always after Christmas on my nan's birthday. You know entertainment was at the core of what I was watching and receiving as a young person. So it was this mixture of like women and women's stories being centred, activism within that and actually, always a massive streak of like time off work, isn't it? Weirdly, that's the thing of like the good night out, you know?

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Yeah, absolutely.

NESSAH MUTHY:

That was the core of it, you know it was yeah. As I said it was my Nan's birthday’s on 27 December so it was a celebratory thing that we did as a family.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Yeah, I think there's a real divide now potentially between the perceived like intellectual, moral salve of new writing. You know what I mean? That they're kind of like, it's going to teach us something? Which equally I like a bit of me loves, I'm like yeah I want to watch something that's about now and it's urgent and does reflect on a difficult question and element of being alive now because i've got that kind of like, you know that is the thing of the life performance in front of you. But yeah it's funny how that often then like reifies into this middle-class atmosphere of quite like light intellectualism actually like it never really challenges. Whereas, yeah the working-class work, it's got the potential to have a song and dance. You know? And a really difficult question.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yes I think it can do both and it should do both, you know. Like we were never tuning in to Coronation Street for like our moral top-up that week. Do you know what I mean? We would watch Coronation Street because it was written by some of the funniest writers in the country. You know Jonathan Harvey and Sally Wainwright. Amazing writers. Phenomenal people that have come through that show. And I think that's what I mean - this sounds like I'm just on a bandwagon for Greenwich but I think that's what great working-class art does it shows you the joy and the pain and that they, you know for everyone no matter what class those two do sit side by side.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Have you had a similar experience in the theatre? Like the moment of watching the working-class experience on tv and how resonant it is? But have you had that moment in theatre where you sit and go oh my god, other than your own plays?

NESSAH MUTHY:

I guess with more recently yes, with plays like Killymuck which was by Kat Woods.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Amazing.

NESSAH MUTHY:

You know benefits-class artist from Northern Ireland. Yeah and that was phenomenal that was so -. I finally I felt in more recent times like oh my gosh you know even though obviously, totally different a part of the world. But there was a commonality to the things that that the characters talked about. The music I can hear The Cranberries in my ear - the music was such a fundamental part of the show and the DNA and pinpointing a time. So Killymuck, certainly but you know Killymuck was also as well as very entertaining, it was fundamentally deeply it was drama, it was pure painful and a deeply emotional familial drama. And I guess also Box Clever in a way which was the piece paired, which is by Monsay Whitney Directed by Stef O’Driscoll and those two were paired together last year at The Bunker.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Two one women shows both directed by working-class women as well, isn't it?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah absolutely [INAUDIBLE]

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Which you could see in the work. Oh absolutely, immediately and that's why I connected with them so much. And again with Box Clever I had a heartbreak, you know? I remember sobbing at both of them. But at the same time as they make you sob they make you roar with laughter and actually, the reason you sob is because they made you care. And they made you laugh about those characters so

It got like the range of it got like there's - I think sometimes with work that's about class it's only through the lens of suffering.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Always from the middle-class lens it's about a lack. It's like, here's the good life, you know TM. And here's a sad life that lacks the things that made the good life, rather than coming at it from like being in and amongst the richness of that world. And actually when you're allowed to like have the full range of humanity like [LAUGHS]

It does tend to be both entertaining and affecting you know?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah absolutely and not so you know - obviously, for me, working-class identity is a core of my identity but I am a human it's like, this it's not the soul essence of people. You know they are - they make mistakes and they don't - we don't all live in perpetual suffering.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Actually I guess without like putting any kind of label on anyone, I think that is a part of working-class identity, that there is a resolve to carry on.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, resilience. Resilience yeah.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Not for everyone, I appreciate, I understand some people's circumstances are very very difficult. But my personal experience and the people that I grew up around and watching were very much that, you know that we have to live side by side - pain and laughter live side by side.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Unbelievably closely, yeah completely.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

And that feels like a more authentic, truthful you know, representation. I think it's interesting think about the notes you get given as a writer as well because I know that we've spoken multiple times about notes that you and I both received in different things, that really what they've been doing is curtailing the working-class elements of the piece.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

And so for you, how do you - like as you said you like kind of stack that stuff off but

It's not always that easy as we both know. How do you hold your screen, you know?

NESSAH MUTHY:

I mean I haven't solved that!

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Tell me, please!

[THEY LAUGH]

NESSAH MUTHY:

Because it's so tied up in - I'm very collaborative ultimately and a democrat

And you know total - hands up - a massive people pleaser, I don't like conflict. Okay, okay we'll just do everything then. So I've had to learn the hard way much to other people, including yourself, saying that that isn't going to help you, Nessah, in the long run. But it's easier said than done. I've had to learn the hard way to really find the things that I want to fight for. And I, you know hands out I've compromised when I should never ever have compromised. And actually the pain of compromising when you look back and the anger that you feel, it fuels me into the next thing though, that's the thing that I'm holding on to, I'm not erasing that. And I guess that comes with like being able to carry on in the industry, like I have the privilege of having worked for 10 years now, so I wasn't that person at the start. And there was a fear much, much, much younger on you're always you know. I think again, but particularly my experience often there is a fear that you're gonna get kicked out, in lots of things across working-class identity or my experience. So you don't want to upset anyone because they could turn you on your ear you know? Actually, I think it comes with, sounds so crap, but like being a bit older as well.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

I totally agree. I think a lot of like different identities have this that aren't the default, you know? Even if you're not conscious you assimilate a bit like you play down your whatever it is, you’re working class, your queerness, you know your thick Scottish accent that's now a lot lighter.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like overtime for sure like.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

When I was at uni I absolutely like got like - there's like home videos of me at 15 and you'd think it's a different voice, you know I mean? That's the reality of going through these institutions. Yeah, it's washed out of you, you know? Beaten out of you. And I think you're right it takes losing it to realise that it was the good bit of you. It was the bit that made the work really good. Really meant for me but - yeah and it was true and it was truthful you know it was truthful to your experience, to the characters' experience.

NESSAH MUTHY:

I get you know, a telly thing that some people say is like, with regards to swearing, they say like oh you can have two fucks for one shit yeah so - [LAUGHS]. Like there is a bit of a like a chess game holding on but I have in more recent times been very strong, stronger than I ever was and said no that is not what would not come out of this character's mouth, this is not who they are. It's my play at the end of the day and I'm sticking to it. But that is you know, is hard work. Anyone listening or watching this is gonna go well that's great, you know. How do you get to that point? And it, yeah it's hard.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Like I sort of want to give like the it's not only, because it's not only the confidence.

You know like there's a confidence that you deserved to be in those spaces. You know I always could tell like the - controversial. But I could always tell at uni who'd been to private school and who hadn’t. Because people from private school spoke so brilliantly as if everything they were saying was vital and they spoke slowly. Like literally like the speed dial was up on everyone else and I was like oh yeah, you should listen. But all those things feed into how you compromise along the way.And I'd just love to be like to give like tools to those younger artists, where it's like, there is a way that you can say no. And there's a way that you can interrogate - you don't have to be the person that falls because that other lens that's on you that is just more backed up by society, really bluntly. Like you can hold your own you know.

NESSAH MUTHY:

I guess the other thing that I'd often do is like, if there's something that I am unsure of and I think somebody might be taking out, or you know cutting or wanting to change for a reason that doesn't quite sit right with me, I again, this comes back to the confidence, I ask for the time. I say, let's park that I'm gonna come back to you. Like do a list of pros and cons. Whether I think that should go or whether that should stay. And that because also with my-. You know something else that's very true is this, I’ve got dyslexia and dyspraxia. So I can't always process very quickly in the moment, you know I can’t fight in the moment often, or fight for something in the moment. And that collides with this very collaborative wanting to please everyone thing. So sometimes it's a very toxic mess for me so I have to write everything, down be really clear. And if there's something that rings alarm bells in the moment, I say, well let me park that, let me really interrogate that and think about that because I've got dyslexia and that might not sit right with me. And I will come back with a list of 10 reasons why it should stay.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Articulating why it should be there actually and not letting one unrigorous question destabilise you.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, absolutely yeah. And I guess I always come back to the argument because sometimes the argument is- why is it set here? Why does this character have to be working-class? And I always come back to my sort of core. Talking about what we talked about, the thing is, that they're working-class because that's the landscape that I want to put on stage and on screen. I can't write it unless I do that. So that's a very, very personal maybe a practical and a personal thing. Bring it back to like why the heck you're a writer in the first place, right? Yeah, that person employed me. You know they wanted my voice so that's what they're going to get.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

I've got two questions before we do exercises. What would you say to a middle or upper-class writer who wants to write a working-class story or character?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Good question. Yeah, gosh I would say lots of things! I would say, hey, should this story be reframed from the perspective of the working class character? If so, can you give that space, that literal commission, that space to somebody who is authentically from that background? Like that's a big, that's a meta ask which I understand is you know, sounds probably quite idealistic and financially idealistic. But ultimately that's what I - you know I try and - because I am in a better financial position than I was when I first started, if there's opportunities like that yeah, to pass it over to somebody else.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

I'd be interested as well on like what do you think about form? Like in terms of working-class because I was going through you know working-class plays and stuff, that we can maybe like attach to the description of this for people to look up writers

and the form, you know that like to my eyes naturalism dominated and dominates still. l know you write in naturalism for like for a set of aesthetic reasons but yeah I was wondering like, is there any scope for the working-class form to not be that? Or why is it only that? You know?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, absolutely like a million percent. It's a conversation I have with David Loumgair of Common quite often.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

It's well worth looking up, googling Common's work if you are a working, benefit, under, criminal-class artist. Google Common right now, there you go!

NESSAH MUTHY:

Absolutely because you know something he said to me was where is the working-class horror? Where is the working-class rom-com? Where is the working class - so genre plays into form a lot. And I can't you know, I can't think of you know, when he asked me that question I couldn't think of them. In terms of plays but even you know, moving beyond like - I guess Attacks the Block which actually is extremely old, now very old.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Parasite, weirdly even though I don't I really understand the class system there other than that film.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, absolutely Parasite, I suppose. And written like literally in, you know, the last year or so. Whereas, and I don't you know this is just my hypothesis, I feel like, I didn't - well form wasn't open to me You know, and as a younger writer I like, I didn't know that you could explode. You know, I didn't know that you could explode form in that way. So and then b, there's something about - there's such a hunger to get the story and the characters centre stage that in a way, I'm not saying that naturalism is easier in any shape or form, it's all bloody, bloody hard work but if it's about getting something to the stage, is it quicker and more likely to be quickly understood, if it goes through the form of naturalism?

And actually, there needs to be like um a second-wave, I probably shouldn't say that but like a - you know a new - renaissance I suppose is the right word. The breadth of work and genre that working-class writers, directors, artists embrace and that you know, otherwise we're a bit infantilized in saying that naturalism is your form. And that naturalism is - you can't graduate be beyond that. And actually, I guess now because I'm doing a bit more work in telly and all of my plays that I'm writing, I guess for want of a better phrase are like hyper-theatrical. I don't really know what that means but I am, in everything I'm writing, I am interrogating from and I guess the prime example of that. Even though it was kind of it was given to me, it wasn't something I didn't come up with the absurdist nature of it, but Debbie and I worked on an adaptation of Ionesco's Rhinoceros which had class and race at the heart of it. And for anyone who doesn't know that's a play that was written, there’s lots of things about it. But I think one of the core is sort of the rhinoceros has become a metaphor for nazism. And we updated it to look at the alt-right today.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Yeah it's a whole village of people who start to turn into rhinoceroses.

NESSAH MUTHY:

So I guess that is like my first throw into um - some of the -. One girl in the piece is from a working-class background and I'm aware that she's making it sound like oh she's working-class therefore she joins the alt-right but it's a lot more complicated than that.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Yeah. But it's the complex relationship between the right and the white working class isn't it yeah?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Absolutely that's it yeah, yeah. And the other girl who is mixed race and that is also working-class. I guess it's really interesting to go absurdism related to that world. Made a lot of sense.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Yeah absolutely. And actually, it was horror, wasn't it?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, it was a horror, yeah yeah.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

It was like a - I think that's what we taglined it was like an alt-right horror kind of thing. I looked at a lot of like you know Scream or those kind of horror movies like it was quite gory wasn't it? I think people - there was only one performance of it because of coronavirus. But I think people were terrified! [INAUDIBLE]

NESSAH MUTHY:

But in a way like I was very proud of it because it, you know if you didn't see it, was started off naturalistic and totally pushed into something else. In my own practice that was like a very early, for me, the form had to change through it because what we were dealing with was absurd.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

I think there's like a conversation to be had at some point like about the internet in class as well. The ability to educate yourself online. The sort of young people’s -

like you're getting such a breadth of very edited, but like nevertheless wide experiences through your phone.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah so there's something in that, that I think is like and yeah it's touched on that yeah. Because of that it couldn't be naturalism, it couldn't be because of the original play.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

But it just couldn't be because the subject matter asked for something that, you know like the rhinoceros did broke through a wall, you know yeah and crawled up through from the floor and serenaded someone like it because actually, we are there as a society yeah. Is there any parting thing you'd like to leave a working-class writer watching this before we do the exercises?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Big pressure. I think just I guess what's happened over the last, with regards to lockdown, what's happened to me is and I've been very privileged and able to be in those meetings I understand that it's not always possible but so I've been on a lot of like zooms for other working-class artists across an intersection of disciplines

And other working-class people exist. So if you can you know join a community and it doesn't - I sound like I'm bringing you to a cult! I don't mean it like that!

[LAUGHS]

But that has really inspired me, I didn't know because of poverty and uh you know not being able to afford the train to go to other parts of the country never have you know - there was like a group class and coronavirus meeting which was led by Stefan Jessica and Kat Shoebridge. There were about 60 working-class artists across all disciplines and I had to say this is a moment, this has never happened before, we've never collectivised. And even if we're just talking and sharing you know like well, that was shit and you know it doesn't always have to be like that

DEBBIE HANNAN:

How could we not have that again, right?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, exactly yeah. Like I think if you can get on one of these things you will find a kin a kinship and a connection so that would be like -. that's a very like human thing but writing -. I think you know just keep writing, keep telling the story that you want to tell, the story that you don't see and that needs to be centre stage.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Can I add those things together? Because I would say the thing I see - that i've seen in your career and in mine is exactly the link between those. Which is that once you connect with other artists from that background like you know good things will happen. And to be out there getting burnt out, getting chipped away at, getting those notes, getting washed out, it’s really exhausting. But when you link up with someone who you can have the nuanced conversation with you, can just even start the bloody conversation with at all. You’re, yeah god, like it suddenly you do have - suddenly you've made a home made a pledge for yourself in the space between the two of you. And yeah and it just happened we've gravitated to each other.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Exactly yeah well I was so exhausted about trying to infiltrate institutions and trying to work out what mechanisms that will get me in. That burned me out you know and

for a long time. It's easier said than done but making your own connections and the way to do that is through collectivism. I wish you know I had been able to connect with other working-class even you know like lighting it's not just directors but lighting designers, you know, sound designers. You know like there's something that is so without sounding like wanky but like food for the soul almost, you know like a connectivity that I like. I ushered at the royal court for like nearly nine years and um, yeah being in a building and like just finding I found a community there with within the ushers you know. And so of uh I mean that's another thing on a very practical early level, I know it's not practical right now because they're closed but that was like a secondary education for me. I suppose I mean it was the way I could get in, being in a show, watching the shows over and over again and it was a way I could see shows, be paid to watch shows and have conversations and see you know other forms and forms of theatre.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Yeah I worked in cinemas a lot and I did that. And you also you know, yeah are there other artists other artists that are ushers. We're all artists, graphic novelists, band members. Who like yeah, who lets you expand. I had a conversation with a lighting designer the other day called Katharine Williams in Edinburgh. We were talking about what lockdown had done for us and our perception of our careers and she said this great thing that's like I'm going to stop trying to succeed at theatre and just make work. And I was like, you're so right because succeeding at the theatre is what leads you down all these other paths that other people have done that were never actually built to favour you in the first place. So go find your people, build your own and that is a practical thing. Like it can be done and if you - I find like we're now 10 years in both of us, we’ll answer any, ask for like advice and help, you know what I mean? So ask because people will help. Yeah it's a big call to arms, isn't it?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, yeah absolutely. But it is, its collectivism it's union, you know it's a union without being an official union. It is building your own tribe.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

100 percent. Should we do some of these exercises?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, absolutely.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

I'll get that document up.

NESSAH MUTHY:

My camera might go but I am here. [LAUGHS]

NESSAH MUTHY:

You've done a runner.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

So we've got four exercises that we thought could connect particularly for writers of a working-class background. Although I think it could very much cover the other class identities mentioned as well. So we're just gonna do four of them. I'll kick them off.

The first thing is really celebrating those moments of working-class culture that you do not see on stage. There's quite a lot of that, in fact, Caitlin Moran, I remember said, I'm going to write about being poor, fat, working-class and female until everyone's writing about it. And I remember being like yeah, like you never -

that's a really paraphrased quote, I have to say! But it's such a brilliant thing, that I was like oh yeah, there's so much that is still unsaid, you know.

So for this, the exercise is really simple which is to think of a moment from your life, your lived experience, that you don't see, you've not seen on stage and you've not seen on TV. Let me think of a really good example...I was at my best mates giant family party. She’s from like generations of working-class and there's always a giant paddling pool. All the men around the barbecue, there's this matriarchal grandmother who's got like 10 sovereign rings and just gives out advice to everyone and then there's a cousin who'd just got out of jail. And it was about welcoming him back into the fold, you know. And that moment's just not, like I've never sat in a proscenium arch watching that! So find your own version of that from your lived experience and pick a character in it and write a monologue that is just describing it from all the senses. Don't worry too much about plot, beat or drama. It's just I'm gonna put a person in there and tell you, flesh out a really HD picture of what it's like to be in that moment. And that won't unnecessarily be work as a scene in itself but it's just giving you like, putting it centre stage as you always say, Nessah. And giving it validity. Like it deserves the time to be described and explored and it is as detailed and nuanced as you know, any other level of class experience it just hasn't really hasn't been done too much.So it's giving you time to do that.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, it's brilliant, a really good idea. Something else Debbie and I sort of discussed in the past before but also I think about a lot is it's not what the characters say but it's how they say it. I remember having this really like epiphany moment when I was watching, I know I keep referencing TV but, Happy Valley. And I was like that, you know, this is a working-class story at its core because of the rhythms and the way in which those characters speak and the way in which the words are literally put in a certain order and from that you can kind of detect a voice, almost and a tone and a rhythm of body as well of like being. So one of the things I think - this is like more of an early starter activity, take an existing text and we can give some examples and later on or as additional material and find like a line or a phrase and kind of like deconstruct it in terms of how are the words put together. What are the rhythms and what's the pattern if you look at everything that one character says? Is there a rhythm in which they say it? And how they say it? And also we talked about like well what was the other thing I was gonna say has gone out my brain!

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Like how you lay it out on the page?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah! That's it yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Sort of like writing how - what I do a lot is write how people speak. And I always get. That's another thing I always get told off for in the loose sense like this is repetitious. This is you know, yeah but people are.

And like they don't speak in these perfect eloquent sentences um which is kind of at odds with the idea of dialogue because dialogue is very -

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Honed?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah exactly and actually, I write in a way that is about listening to people. Somebody once said it's very verbatim like and that's because um. So therefore it isn't going to have that clipped nature to it. And that - there's a balance I think there’s, you can still be truthful to the rhythm in which somebody speaks and be pushing the story forward in terms of the dialogue that they say.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

I'd say as well what I find useful is to like let go of the grammar rules. And if you want to use all capitals on a word because you want to hit that emphasis, or you want to layout a sentence, one word one word, one word, one word, big long dense bit because you want to get the rhythm over, then do that. I'm just thinking of like writers, Scottish writers like Ali Smith or Jenni Fagan who write in the rhythm of like Scottish patterns particularly. And can see it on the page and that's that gives the actor the performance. Like if you've got if you've got um a voice going to swear

But you've got like fuck fuck fuck fuck written in a line. It's a different thing from fuck a big space, yeah? You know like you can deliver the thought and the rhythm in that. That is directly linked to class use of language I think.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Absolutely yeah and uh being from different locations with different dialects and just yeah um, you know embrace that rather than like trying to cut it out.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Morna Pearson which - I just trying to think of one of her titles - is an amazing playwright in Scotland Who writes in doric which is like a really specific dialect. But yeah she's well - there's so many plays by her, Artist Man and Mother Woman. If you want to see someone who's really like sitting in a different way of speaking and hasn't been edited and washed out.

The third one we had was about metaphor and this is about pushing the form thing a bit. So I think the stage is really good for making a space - that's quite directorial - that works as a metaphor, like it's really helpful for that so for instance, the really clear example of that is if you want to show someone nervous in an exam. You could put a kid at a table with a bit of paper and a clock, or you could put them on a six-foot-tall chair and a six-foot-tall table that wobbles with a clock that's moving too fast and that's not realism but it's closer to the feeling. I'm up here, the time's going, everything's going to fall apart. And that's more metaphorical because it goes into the expression of the thing. I think there would be and maybe again, taking a couple of experiences from your lived experience of that class identity and finding the on stage you know either more expressive or more metaphorical version of that thing.

So I just thought like, I don't know know if this is useful but like a big part of like growing up on the only estate that I did um, it's going over to the high flats with my best mate and learning a dance routine. Always a pop song done badly.

[THEY LAUGH]

But I was like, what a brilliant thing like that we haven't really seen on stage, maybe in a film like in Fish yeah, there's kind of a brilliant moment of that.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah a little bit in that yeah.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

But I thought what a great thing, you could do the realist version, which is two young girls you know, learning a dance routine to like a shit cassette because it would have been the 90s. Or you could do the stage version, where actually, you know, like it becomes huge thing and there's and the backing dancers in their head come in, and the lights become the music video of their mind and you know a disco ball drops in and you know and it’s. That's the feeling of doing that dance with your friends, like you're the coolest, hottest thing alive. But equally, you could do that on something that - I chose that euphoric example because I think that's a thing you don't see as much. But equally, you can do it for moments of distress as well moments of pain. If you had a hyper-realistic set and someone's lost their husband or something, you could remove every single bit of the set around them and then that's a metaphor for what losing your home is. That's quite a literal metaphor but you know what I mean!

NESSAH MUTHY:

Absolutely.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Wait, do you want to do that alphabet one?

NESSAH MUTHY:

So I guess this one is more about starting out or if you're blocked and you're struggling to unlock something about what your story might be. And I have to be completely transparent, this I've edited this based on something that Evan Placey

Playwright, shared with me once. [INAUDIBLE] Also, it's about the left and right brain coming in together and like the chaos side of your brain and the more structured side because you do need both when you're when you're writing, basically. Or making any piece of art, I guess you need those need to be sort of sitting together in some shape or form.

So with this exercise what you do is write down the whole alphabet on the left-hand side of your piece of paper or on your computer or whatever and just write - don't think - just right the first word that comes to mind connected with that letter. So I've got an example here apple, beasts, capitalism.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

What more could you want? There's a title for a new play!

NESSAH MUTHY:

And then once you've done that, put that to one side or turn over a new piece of paper and then - sometimes it's useful to put a timer on this, so maybe like put a timer on for one minute and write out all the themes that could be a subject matter for a play related to working-class identity or the working-class experience. So again, I've got some examples; hope, poverty porn, misrepresentation. Being the only working-class person in a middle-class workplace. So and then when that time and right again, don't think, just write. And when that timer stop stops, what you do next is kind of marry those two things together and it's really helpful in terms of creating a first character potentially. And what you do now is write a monologue. Pick one of those subjects that you've chosen, take the alphabet words that you've got and then write the monologue using the words you wrote down in the alphabet exercise, right? Write a monologue based on one of the themes but you must use the words in the order of which you wrote them. You can add in other words so I mean, I'm sure i'm going to get commissioned off the back of this! Apples are like beasts um and beast is like capitalism. Yeah? That's like truly horrifically terrible.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

You could do like monologue about hope. As long as it's like, oh um I picked the apple off the tree. The beast took it off me. Or something?

NESSAH MUTHY:

Yeah, exactly yeah.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

I'm not sure that was hopeful!

[LAUGHS]

But that's the point yeah!

NESSAH MUTHY:

Again when you do that part because that's like three parts for this exercise, when you do that part, you know you don't have to think too much like Lynn Cocklin and always said this when I was training and doing training to be a playwright that we worry that we think too much as writers. Just getting something down, you can always edit it later, you can throw it away but something is better than nothing. And generating that material takes pressure off you, just fill in and then you can just carve it and I guess that was really opening to me because I think partly just let's see and partly the working-class identity. You've got to get it right you know you can’t. You've got one shot and you've got to get it right yeah otherwise you're

out the door and that was really like liberating to me because I was like, I just gotta get it out. I don't gotta get it right.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Thank you so much Nessah that was so wicked. I just think like you and I have spent all of lockdown having conversations about class, really and it's just really exciting and hopeful that institutions and the whole industry, really also starts having that conversation because it is the most intersectional thing isn't it like it's the spine that all the other identities meet. Like we've got a long history of brilliant working-class artists who, across all the forms. Yeah so I hope that that shows up in theatre even more when we start to reopen.

NESSAH MUTHY:

Absolutely, yeah. Thank you so much that was brilliant.

DEBBIE HANNAN:

Thank you for your time.

[♪ Gentle electronic music]