

**Transcription**  
**Open Submissions Workshop #13: Reader Interviews**

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**Video (with closed captions):** https://youtu.be/HJzCEcRbKhM

[♪ Gentle electronic music]

Interviews with Eleanor White, Naomi Joseph, Shilpa T-Hyland, Katherine Nesbitt and Liam Rees.

ELEANOR:

Hello! Welcome back to Open Submissions Workshops. I hope you're enjoying the series so far. I'm Eleanor and I'm the Literary Associate at the Traverse Theatre. In this week's workshop, I'll be speaking to some of the members of the Traverse's reader panel. When you send a script to the Traverse through Open Submissions, it's read by one of our talented readers who are theatre professionals working across the UK. They read all of the scripts they receive anonymously, which allows them to really focus in on the story that you have to tell. If there's something about the script that excites them, they'll put it forward for further consideration by the Traverse Artistic Team. Today i'm speaking to our readers about what they look for in a script, the kind of criteria they mark scripts against and how they approach giving feedback to writers. I hope you enjoy this session and that will give you some insight into the script reading process. Thanks so much for tuning in.

NAOMI:   
Hi my name is Naomi and I am a writer and a performer and a script reader.

KATHERINE:

My name is Katherine Nesbitt and I am primarily a director of new writing and I also work as a script reader for the Traverse and for a number of other organisations.

LIAM:

Hello! So I'm Liam Rees. I'm a theatermaker, generally. But I mostly do dramaturgy, writing, translation and devising.

SHILPA:

Hi my name is Shilpa T-Hyland and I'm a director.

**Q1: HOW DO YOU APPROACH READING A SCRIPT?**

LIAM:

So when it comes to the Open Submissions I have no information about the writer. All I really get is a brief synopsis that the writer has given me of the script.

KATHERINE:

The brilliant thing about reading for the Traverse is that they have some sort of prompts that are really helpful to think about. In general when reading and also to kind of use as you go along. And so looking at whether something is like innovative or new, is the story urgent? So those sort of things I kind of always keep in my head. And I'm always really interested in like why it's a play. So I'm always looking for some kind of clue, or something in the way that the writer has written that tells me that this sort of has to be in a room with other people. It has to be live. It has to have like the live audience with it.

LIAM:

I’ll basically just take notes throughout it, asking simply, what am I reading? And trying to approach it on the writer's own terms. Because I have no idea who you are, or what your intentions are, all I can really see is what is in front of me. And so I'll really try to see what is this? What is perhaps the intention? And what is it that grabs me? And a really important thing for all the readers is to recognise that we're just one person. And there will be scripts that I read that don't resonate with me for personal biases or whatever reason, it might just be a question of I just don't understand what it is you're going for and that just means that it didn't connect to me. And I think that's always a really important thing for writers to remember is that ultimately any feedback you get from the readers it's ultimately just someone's opinion. And you're welcome to reject it. So whenever I then approach reading script I'll try to approach it as - objectively isn't the right word because objectivity is impossible but simply just saying, this is what I read, this is what I experienced while reading it. And often I'll have questions for the writer And those aren’t necessarily questions that I need answering it's more questions for the writer to consider. And if you can answer them yourself great and if you can't then that's a point for you to then consider. Oh well, how do I then take some of the next steps to develop it? And then often after that, after a full read I'll fill out kind of feedback for the writer like I just described and also fill out some feedback for the Traverse.

KATHERINE:

I'm not always looking for something to like, reinvent the wheel. I suppose so when thinking should something be innovative or should it be new or urgent, I don't think that necessarily has to be something that throws out the rule book in every aspect. But I also kind of want to know that someone's writing something that hasn't been written before. And whether that's the story, or the characterization, or the form, or the structure that they're using but I just want to see something new.

LIAM:

Ultimately the aim of Open Submissions isn't to find new scripts it's to find writers. And it's to find writers who've got something interesting to say or a really interesting way of approaching something that we've seen before, which I think is one of the big misconceptions about Open Submissions. This isn't about programming, it's about developing relationships with writers.

**Q2: DO YOU MARK SCRIPTS AGAINST A CERTAIN CRITERIA? IF SO, WHAT ARE THEY?**

SHILPA:

It feels like an obvious answer but the thing that hits me first about reading any script is the characters. So I wanna know what makes them tick, what do they care about? What have they got to lose? What do they want? I think if there's stuff missing about that then that's the first thing that I really feel the lack of. But equally, if there's just enough information fed to me then it's the thing that makes me want to keep reading and find out what happens to them.

NAOMI:

I try to just be as open as possible and to accept the script for what it is. And by that I mean, when I'm reading a script I'm not necessarily looking for a finished product. I'm looking for the potential of a script. So I'm looking for, what are the really exciting elements about it that with a bit more development, a dramaturg or something like that. What could make the script even stronger? So I'm not looking for a finished product, I'm looking for the potential.

SHILPA:

There's kind of a list of things that are always in the back of my head. So style. It's always interesting to me to see a writer develop a style. And maybe how consistent that is across a piece,

If they could push it further in certain places. And also things like what the entire internal logic of a script is. So obviously, it's fiction it doesn't need to work the same way as our world works but it needs to be consistent within its own rules. And so how well that world-building is there, something that always interests me. I think all the structure and clarity and I'm a big fan of surprises and a bit of ambiguity but also brass tacks, when you get to the end, does it make sense and what was our journey like getting there? And so there's something interesting to me about how we as an audience are fed information and what our relationship is to the story as it evolves. Pacing and staked is another thing that I like looking at, again it's that element of risk that I think keeps us interested and I think exist in literally any story, so it can be a really mundane situation but if the if there's enough characterisation and enough stakes in what they want and what they've got to lose, then anything can be an exciting story. And I guess the last thing that I am interested in is how that story relates to the rest of the world. The rest of the ever-changing world that we're in… So is it a story that we've heard many times before? Is it a new story? Is it a new take on a story? Not everything has to be about explicitly about current politics but I think I do want you writing to have some sort of relationship to what's unfolding in the world around us in some way.

**Q3: HOW DOES READING SCRIPTS ANONYMOUSLY AFFECT YOUR PROCESS?**

NAOMI:

I feel like that really benefits my reading process because it means that I'm solely focusing on the script. I try to be as open and objective as possible but reading and giving feedback is inevitably always subjective. But when you have an anonymous script I don't have to think about my judgment, It isn't clouded by the writer's name, or their accolades, or their lack of accolades or their CV. I can just focus on the quality of the work, And that's where my focus should be, so I find it - I think it's really useful and really beneficial for me as a reader but also for the writer.

**Q4: WHAT KIND OF FEEDBACK DO YOU GIVE?**

LIAM:

So whenever I am responding to writers I try to respond as if I were an artist in the room collaborating Saying well, that's what I've seen, that's what makes sense. And I try to leave as much space open for the writer to feel that they have agency with the feedback. Because obviously, this is what I saw, this is what I experienced I don't know if that's what you intended But you now have something quite concrete to work with.

SHILPA:

I ask questions that's how I give feedback. It's very similar to how I direct, I think. I suppose I've got a bit of a fear of being, particularly with a draft of a script that, I'm not sure whether it's been through five drafts or one draft if it's just emerged. So I'm always a little bit fearful of being too prescriptive and the feedback I give, I guess I want it to facilitate the writer in their next stage of thinking about that script. So questions that I quite often ask, whether something can be pushed further, Whether that's a stylistic element, or a character element. And again thinking about what kind of information you're getting when and how much information am I asked? And is this the best place for this information? Is it too much information or too little information? But yeah, questions to facilitate, I guess like a playful way of looking at the script for its next draft.

LIAM:

If it's relevant I'll sometimes give recommendations of - sometimes it's plays to read, sometimes it's films, sometimes pieces of art, sometimes it's essays or youtube videos, that I simply think, oh that shines very interestingly with what you've written, or what you've written has made me think about this. Or it's that someone has approached a similar topic from a completely different angle, or they're using the same form to talk about different subjects. And that's not me saying, look at this, this is how you need to copy them to make it better. That's simply saying here, explore all the different forms, take what you think maybe works. See what's possible and then reevaluate your own writing. And again that's open for you to accept or reject.

NAOMI:

I try to be as constructive as possible and I try to give specific examples. So I think there's nothing worse, I'm a writer as well, so I've had my fair share of feedback! And I think that there's nothing worse than getting feedback that's just really general and wishy-washy. I think the whole purpose of feedback is to give the writer a stepping stone, it's something for them to go, take their script, go away and consider different elements about it that the reader has flagged up. They don't necessarily have to agree with everything but it's something for them to consider. it's something for them to go away and and work on. And so I think, I try to be as constructive as I can. And to give specific examples as well. It's no use me saying oh you use humour really well. Well at what point?! If it's not a comedy the whole way through, you know it's really useful and really necessary to be specific, so that's what I try to do with my feedback.

**Q5: WHAT EXCITES YOU ABOUT A SCRIPT?**

KATHERINE:

I'm really excited by someone who is just sort of doing something quite bold and so maybe has a big idea. And that big idea and might be that they've written something formally really challenging. And it doesn't use narrative in a linear way, or doesn't use language in a supernaturalistic way. That's sort of something that really excites me because I just think they're really pushing at the art form and pushing at the boundaries of what it is and they're asking something of me, as the reader. And asking something of me, potentially as an audience member in the future. Like giving me something to do and kind of dots to join.

LIAM:

It's a really difficult question because every script is different and every writer is different. For me, I mean my own personal tastes and biases, I mean I love anything that plays with form. One of the key questions I always have, whenever I read a script, is why does this have to be a theatre? And I think it's a really useful question for you to ask of what story are you trying to tell? What experience are you trying to convey? And why is theatre are the best medium for that? There are a lot of scripts that I'll start reading and they're good and they have promise but I'll start reading it and go but this should be on TV, this should be a film. And it would probably be better served by that medium than as a piece of theatre. The scripts that really excite me are the scripts that recognise that theatre is a place where you can be really weird and you can play a lot.

SHILPA:

Voices and stories that we don't see so often on our stages is something that is always exciting to me. It's nice to be surprised! I think something that I always quite admire is when a writer has taken an unusual or a slightly wacky idea and run with it. It's always exciting to me to see someone experimenting. Be that experimenting with form, or story or style. And just going for it! And again going back to the characters just empathisable characters. I suppose one of my pet peeves is a baddie that isn't human. And one of my loves is when I'm made to empathise with a character I didn't think I could see eye to eye with. And I'm all about the humanity I think that's what's exciting about storytelling in general.

**Q6: WHAT DOESN’T EXCITE YOU WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER IT IN A SCRIPT?**

NAOMI:

What doesn't excite me is when a writer spoon-feeds me the story. I feel like audiences are so much smarter than we give them credit for! And there's nothing wrong with making me, as the reader, work hard for something. There's nothing wrong with making you - you want to keep me or to keep the reader reading. So that means not to give everything away and I feel sometimes in scripts there's a tendency to explain everything. Or to tie-up every single loose end and sometimes that just means that it weakens your script. It makes it a little bit less interesting.

KATHERINE:

I'm always very dismayed when I read a script and it's a screenplay. And that happens quite a lot I feel like I often encounter things that aren't written as plays. So they're half a screenplay, or they might be a short story, or so something that isn't really engaging with like the form of a play. If you've written something that's a screenplay and you think maybe it would work as a play, I think it's just nice to see some effort or some work from the writer to kind of bring that into a live form.

**Q7: DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR WRITERS HOPING TO SUBIT TO OPEN SUBMISSIONS?**

LIAM:

Congratulations on submitting because it's an incredibly difficult thing to actually write a script. That in and of itself is an achievement. Because it is so easy to critique something and it is significantly harder to create.

SHILPA:

Yeah, I'd say number one, do it. And there's no reason not to and then yeah, take a risk.

Commit to your idea and push it as far as you can. But be rigorous, so all those things make it make sense and make them characters that you can empathise with. And yeah, just be a bit brave with it, I think.

LIAM:

Best advice is, be bold. Don't try to mimic anyone else.

NAOMI:

Don't apologize for your work. Sometimes within a script you get a little note from the writer that sort of explains away the script and I think if you've had the courage to write something and the courage to submit something, don't detract from your work by explaining it away. You don't need to do that. You stand by your script and with that in mind I think and lots of people say things like this but it's really important to write the script that you want to write and not what you think we want to read. Don't just write on a subject matter or include buzzwords because you think that that's what we're looking for. We're looking for you really need to write the script that you want to write.

LIAM:

We're interested in you and your voice and what you've got to say. And at the end of the day, this really a space for you to just be as wild as you want to be. One of the notes I've found myself giving a lot is you can go further with this. At the end of the day, this is not reality, theatre is the world in extremis. So if you've got a character in a situation, push it to its furthest extreme. If you've got someone who's dealing with a problem, mine it until there's nothing left to explore. Theatre when it holds back is dead and you can’t take risks.

SHILPA:

I guess also never assume that your script is sitting alone and uncared for in an office somewhere because script readers like me really enjoy reading them! And it's really exciting to see all the different things that come through the Trav and imagine what they might turn out to be one day.

KATHERINE:

And I think writing a full draft of a play is really a big achievement. And I think well done you that you've done it. The only way you can get better as a writer is to test those ideas out and by having other people read them and react to them. So I think by submitting to Open Submissions, you’re looking to see if there's some there's something in your idea, if it's just in your head or if there's really something good about it. And so I would say submit, there's a good chance that you might get some written feedback that's helpful. You might not necessarily but you might get something back that's really helpful. But also to remember like that - I think the process is really well structured but everything is also subjective. So if you submit and you don't get any further, you get some feedback just go and use that and keep working on it. Use the Open Submissions as a way to sort of improve your work as a writer.

LIAM:

Be brave. Be bold. Be yourself. Thank you and please submit!

[♪ Gentle electronic music]