

**Transcription**
**Open Submissions Workshop #14: Quick-fire Questions and Advice from Playwrights**

**Audio file location:** https://open.spotify.com/episode/4xBUjV7QPhMS1i0dWcTWjk?si=QlZnLkUmQDmRsI\_32roszg

**Video (with closed captions):** <https://youtu.be/f9u56tiftcs>

[AUDIO BEGINS]

**Q1: What’s your most memorable experience as a theatregoer?**

MEGHAN TYLER:

A large pterodactyl came out on the Citizens Theatre stage at *Fever Dream: Southside* by Douglas Maxwell. I honestly don't think I’ve been so mind-blown as a writer seeing something like that. Also I was just in fits of giggles as I'd seen this amazing, ridiculous, brilliant thing that had been threaded all the way through on stage. It was just excellent.

DOUGLAS MAXWELL:

I went to see a production of Chris Hannon's amazing play *Elizabeth Gordon Quinn* once, it's one of my favourite shows, and during this night there was a thunderstorm outside. It was in the Citizens, and it started off just like a normal storm but then it started getting totally wild. The walls were shaking and the roofs were rattling and then you started getting these massive, big, kind of [Vocalises thunder strike sound] and the actors had to just drop all the technique in all the rehearsals and just scream from the edge of the stage "Can I have a quiet word with you?” and all that technique went away and they were hating it, I could tell the actors were hating it, but my god the audience! We all bonded! We were having a blast, because it just made very clear what theatre is, which is an experience that only happens tonight. It's not made for repeats, it's not about that, you never write a play and think to yourself 'Ah, this will make sense to the audience the second time you see it, you know, it's just about tonight and the weather has something to do with it the context of the audience's life what's going on with them affects the meaning of the play. Anyway, it was pretty cool.

CLARE DUFFY:

I have to go back to the first time I suppose I got real shivers down my spine and felt the palpable excitement of having hundreds of people in a room all moved together by the same performance and it was Ian McKellen being *Richard III*. The final speech of Richard III, and I was probably about 14 and it blew me away, um, and I stood up and I was clapping but I could have cried, and I think, yes, it was an extraordinary performance and it's an amazing end to an amazing story, um but it was just the power of all of those people all together, I suppose.

MATILDA IBINI:

One that really stood out for me, very early on in my career, um I went to go see a show called *Bears in Space*, and what was really, other than the title, what was really brilliant about it was um it used puppetry and, uh, I'd never, that was my first experience of at least seeing something kind of like a show that had puppetry in it that wasn't necessarily like aimed at children, um, and it was just brilliant! Like, it opened my mind in a way, uh, in a way of how imaginative it was, the performers were incredible and the storytelling was brilliant, and it just kind of really reminds me, when I think of that show to put all my favourite things that I enjoy as a theatregoer into my work that my taste as a theatre goer is also the things I want to create. I want to make people laugh, and feel moved, and feel a little bit different when they leave the theatre.

**Q2: How did you start out as a writer?**

FRANCES POET:

I started my career in script development so I was a script reader, then I became a literary associate at Hampstead Theatre, I'd been a literary assistant at the Bush Theatre, I'd been a script reader for the National Theatre, Soho, um, and then I moved up to Scotland for the job of literary manager at the National Theatre of Scotland. All through that time I had worked with amazing writers, and it was very humbling, the idea that you would write when you were getting to work with Zinnie Harris and Dennis Kelly, I mean was ridiculous, why, why would you even put yourself through the humiliation? But then I had a child and I was on maternity leave and I was away from it all and suddenly, I don't know whether it was the humiliation of my very long labor including a very odd moment where lots of student doctors all came in and just watched me in silence whether perhaps humiliation no longer had its power on me now I was a mother but, I started writing then and never looked back.

OLIVER EMANUEL:

So I was working in a book shop in 2002, I’d just finished university and I had an idea just the very first few lines of a play and I really didn't want to work at a bookshop, so I phoned up my friend Dan Bai from University, and I said 'I think I've got an idea for a play, we should take it to the festival, would you direct it for me?' and he said yes, foolishly and so that's what we did! I wrote a play, we took it to the festival, it cost us 87 pounds, we wrote to M&S and got free suits and we wrote to Ikea and got a free set and then we got it was back in the day this is obviously the early naughties so we were lucky enough to get a review from The Guardian and it was a good one and we managed to then get some funding to tour around, so yes, that was that's how it started out.

MEGHAN TYLER:

I began my journey as a writer when I was on the BA acting course at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. There was a module called 'On the Verge' which basically allowed us all to take on different roles within the industry and at the time my favourite play was 'Waiting for Godot' by Samuel Beckett which you might know, and I read somewhere that Beckett said that women couldn't do Godot because they didn't have prostrates so, I was a bit like 'well fu\*\*\* you, Beckett' and wrote my own version! And then from there it sort of went to a number of different festivals and picked up some awards and some steam, and I really wasn't expecting that trajectory at all and, it pretty much changed my life.

HANNAH LAVERY:

I think I would have to be honest and say I've had many starts and many stops. I think the biggest thing for me would have been, would have been the Scottish Book Trust, actually, I wrote a wee story for their 'My Favourite Place' project back in 2011 or 12 or something, and I think that was kind of me getting back into-. It's probably the first time actually of sending work out and putting it out there in any sort of concerted way. Then from that I just think I went through about a year where I just looked on every like I think it was the Scottish Book Trust writers opportunity site and I just chose everything that had a deadline or a submission thing and I almost just wrote to the submission and I did that for a period of about six months and I think that and getting accepted for things by doing that kind of build up my confidence and it was probably quite a slow process of beginning to take myself seriously. Then going to open mics and reading my work and then just going to every workshop I could find and could afford um but I s'pose, really in terms of being a playwright, writing for theatre, the thing that really started that for me was finding a wee room in Edinburgh for the Edinburgh Fringe and with a group of friends putting on for one Sunday in the Fringe just little things that we've written and performed them ourselves and I think through that I started to meet people and people started to see my work and I grew confidence by the responses I got but I'd been trying to start to be a writer well I tried to start to be a writer for much of my late teens and twenties, and I don't think it was until I was in my mid 30s that I kind of found a way how to do it. I think it took me a long time to learn how to become a writer and how you and how you could who you sent stuff to and how you navigated that world so thanks to the Scottish Book Trust for that.

**Q3: Where and when do you do your writing?**

CLARE DUFFY:

So my ideal day would be to get up, feeling good and go for a run and then come home and write for maybe two hours and then have some food, a little sleep and then get up and then do some editing in the afternoon. It never happens like that.

HANNNAH LAVERY:

I write anywhere. I will write with my laptop up while i'm making the family dinner. I will write in my bed if i've got 10 minutes. I will write on the train and what I don't do - a lot of writers talk about having a perfect space and they'll say my house is never clean, never. It’s never cleaner than when I have to write, when I’ve got a writing deadline. Me - I will, everything can fall apart around me and I will sit on my laptop and I will type the story if I’ve got something to do, someone's asked me to write something so, for me, I think it's really about just not thinking you need a certain, you know, things have to be a certain way for you to write. I think you just have to treat it like a job like I've got 20 minute window I've got to get this done I'll get it done. Or the telly's on and the kids are happy or whatever I'm just getting my laptop and I'll just get something done and I'll get finished and so I just, I've not got any tips or routines just like, there's no ideal environment for you in a way it's just about you know taking advantage of every moment that you can find. If you’ve got like a 20 minute train journey or a bus journey every day use that to write something say at the end of this journey I'm gonna have a page of something or if you’re at home and and everyone wants to watch you know like a rubbish tv program that I’m not interested in then iIll just get my laptop on my lap and I'll just type away something. And so it's just finding those moments and not thinking it has to be a certain way.

CLARE DUFFY:

When I did the IASH fellowship, that was glorious because I had a room with a door and a lock and there was one telephone in there and only one person knew the number, and that was, like, the best thing.

**Q4: What’s the best piece of writing advice you’ve been given?**

OLIVER EMANUEL:

I was lucky enough to be mentored by Richard Bean when I was quite a young writer and he said, write for actors. I think that's a really good piece of advice. If you write for actors, if you write good parts actors will want to be in your play and I think that really makes difference in terms of the quality of what you get back.

HANNAH LAVERY:

I'm not sure who said this, probably quite a lot of people, probably my mother, is just gone with it. Just do it. You know, if you want to do something just do it don't worry about being a perfectionist don't worry about it being 100%, that's what editing is, that's what getting in the room with your work with actors and everything else. Just do it, just get it on the page, get words on the page because if you don't have words on the page there's nothing to work with and I think the biggest obstacle to people is just thinking that they have to have the complete idea, or they have to that every sentence they write is perfect. And they’ll write a sentence and they'll spend a whole day just working on that one sentence and for me it's just get all the words on the page, just get it all down and then spend the next, you know, two weeks, two years perfecting but you can't do any of that until you have stuff on the page so as my mother would say, just get on wi' it!

MATILDA IBINI:

It's about being patient, because writing is the long game. It is a long game career, there aren't overnight successes those things just don’t happen, it takes forever to write a play. So you need a lot of patience with yourself, with the industry but also a lot of patience as you develop your craft. Like that that the hours and the years that's gonna take. I think just being patient with yourself as you learn and being persistent this is an industry with a lot of rejection and it can be really painful especially earlier. I mean actually rejection doesn't really ever get any easier I think you just get better at being able to move forward. But being really persistent that this is what you want to do, you want to you want to tell stories, you want to collaborate with other artists, you want to put your stories out into the world and hope they have some kind of effect and I think you kind of have to have reminders as to why you're doing this because it can get really difficult and take a while to see things, to see your work on the stage, or for you to be in something or direct something so be patient and persistent and don't give up after your first try. I’ve written tons of terrible plays that I'm very grateful will never see the light of day but they are terrible but by writing those terrible plays I wrote better ones. I could I couldn’t write the better ones if I didn't start at terrible.

MEGHAN TYLER:

Number one would be don't be a d\*\*\*, that's just general advice for the industry and I think it's very important. Number two would be from Oliver Emmanuel who said "Just finish the thing!" which I've sort of reiterated in my own lessons with my students. Just finished the thing even if it's dog s\*\*\*, just finish the f\*\*\*\*\*\* thing and the third piece of advice I've received which I will carry with me to the grave is from Rebecca Meyers at the Lyric Theatre and she said, "more bonkers, more mad, more insane" and I have run with that ever since!

CLARE DUFFY:

We were presenting a double bill and I was performing in one half of that double bill and I had written the second half and my performance as an actor and as a writer were equally panned. It was really rubbish and like I thought you know what's the point? What’s the point of going on and my dad said kind of exactly that he said to me, "Well, so you're gonna give up now then are you?"And I just love him for saying that to me because I kind of felt like maybe I could have and he obviously knew that because he said he was saying in his own way don't give up. So don't give up it's probably the best bit of advice that anybody can give you. Look i’m crying a little bit! [tuts].

**Q5: Do you ever suffer from writing block, if so, how do you get over it?**

NATASHA SUTTON WILLIAMS:

I think if you're really if you're really, really struggling, I think it's worth writing something else for fun in a different medium to keep your writing juices flowing, so you know writing a piece of poetry, writing in a journal, writing a song um really writing in any other medium. Just going, okay this is just a bit of fun there's no pressure to that. If that if you're really struggling with that I would say do something else creative like playing an instrument, drawing, reading, you know, going playing with your nephews or you know just doing something fun and creative. You know you could make like a den with um kids that you hang out with or whatever. And if that still doesn't you come back to your work and you're still like okay I- I can't deal with this, then just do anything else and give your mind a rest because your mind is saying like I'm not energised for this. So it is important, although I don’t necessarily take my own advice, to take a break.

OLIVER EMANUEL:

I've kind of come to the conclusion that you're always going to get stuck at one point in a process of writing. I try not to stress out about it too much. I mean I do stress out about it, but I try not to stress about it too much. I think it's just part of the business of creating something that you'll get so far and then there’ll be a point where you get stuck. I do all kinds of things, sometimes I'll be doing- so I'll do some reading, sometimes I'll go for a walk sometimes I will just try and do something else. The thing to do is often take your mind off it. The reason I think that one gets stuck is because it is often ego it's that you've got in the way somehow that you're worried about it being good or worried about it being bad and actually what you really need to do is get out of the way.

HANNAH LAVERY:

I don't think I've ever really suffered from that traditional writer's block of looking at a blank page and not knowing what to write. I think the biggest difficulty or the biggest block to my sort of creativity or writing, is the fact that I have other responsibilities. And I think as of as many women probably suffered the same is that actually it's the other demands on my time as, you know bringing up three kids, I'm holding down a full-time job, and also I suppose for a long time it was my own confidence about if I had a right to be a writer, if anyone wanted to listen to my stories, if I was writing about the right thing. So there was a lot of that, I think there was a lot in my kind of my teens and my 20s, my early 30s where I just wasn't- I didn't feel like there was any space for my words. What I wanted to say, I didn’t have a lot of confidence in the fact that anyone would want to read it, or be interested, or to watch what I wrote. And then I had, then it was the struggle of trying to balance motherhood and full-time work and all of those other things to find the space. But I tell you, if you give me an hour in a room with a laptop, or a bit of paper and a pen, then I will

grab that time and use it as best I can. So I've never, I don't think I’ve ever felt like I didn't have anything to write about. I just wasn't always sure that anyone wanted to listen to it.

**Q6: Why do you think theatre is important?**

DOUGLAS MAXWELL:

I mean obviously I do think theatre is important because I've dedicated my adult life to it and I love it deeply and passionately. I don't know if important is the right word is it? When important gets knocked around in the arts I get a little bit itchy- it reminds me of the way we teach Shakespeare in this country you know to telling a 13 year old "kneel before this really important thing that makes no sense whatsoever, this is the best you'll ever see in your life if you don't understand it you're thick!”. You know, and I think maybe the arts and what we do is so vital and so wonderful because it's not important, it’s the excess, it's what's on top of our human experience.

FRANCES POET:

It's really interesting at the moment living through this pandemic and how it's such a frightening moment for theatre. You know which theatres will survive it, what will the industry will be like the other side of this, how long will it take audiences to trust being in a space together. So I suppose it is a moment where it consolidates your sense of how important theatre is. I've been watching all the live streaming at home, lots of things that you can watch and it's great because you're sitting at home and you don't have to pay anything and you can be in your slippers and you can have your cup of tea, and you can pause it! But for me, none of that is what theatre is, and I think theatre is being in a room full of people and collectively responding to what we're watching on stage and I think it's in our DNA that sense of how it how theatre can teach us our own sense of morality. You think about the sort of Greek tragedies and think about Ibsen that sense where we watch a character and we watch them do something that we don't want them to do and we all collectively go 'don’t do it!' and that confirms our sense of what is right and wrong in the world. That is, you can't recreate that. That is theatre. And it is vital it's part of being human. I had an amazing conversation with the reporter Alan Little the other day who was talking about being in Sarajevo in their lockdown, three years eight months of it, and he said people risked their lives to go to the theatre and they didn't have electricity in their homes, they didn't have water and I asked, if they'd had Netflix would they still have risked their lives? He said I think they would and I think they would, I think human beings need those stories and we need to receive them collectively.

DOUGLAS MAXWELL:

Because we're human and we need more than what it is to just survive we are born needing more than that a baby comes into the world screaming "I deserve better than this!”. We know there's something more we can feel it and we're reaching for it our entire lives. We need to be different and change and reach and the arts and all those things we add on is that reach in that other world we don't need jewellery, we don't need fancy cakes, we don't need rock and roll, we don’t need theatre, you know? And yet without it we're just not human, we’re just animals. It's all this stuff, where our soul, for want of a better word, reaches out and in theatre we do that in company with other people trapped in the same room, humans over here telling stories to humans over there and you're a little bit closer to the white heat of it. I think a little bit so maybe important to know the right word it's not about surviving, it's about living.

**Q7: What does the Traverse mean to you?**

FRANCES POET:

Well, the Traverse means something different to me for the 12 years I've been in Scotland than it did when I lived in London. When I lived in London it was the place of all joy and sorrow in the Edinburgh Festival it was the sort of the thrill of the festival as you sort of plunging yourself into a million different worlds and being elated and being heartbroken and being transported. Since I've moved to

Scotland, I now know the incredible work it’s doing all year round and my career -really you can’t look at my career and separate it from the Traverse.

DOUGLAS MAXWELL:

Traverse is an open door to me always has been even when no other doors were open. I would go and have a meeting and somebody in the Traverse would tell me what I was doing wrong, they would listen, they would buy me a coffee, they'd make me feel like i was part of this scene. It still is somewhere I want to take my work, take my ideas I just like being there. I think of it like the bar rather than the theatres. I picture it packed with all these different people of all generations all mingling and ideas and aesthetics all kind of in competition with each other but in a good way just trying to get better and better and better so it's an open door and it's a place where I can be in conversation with lots of artists, younger and older than me.

MEGHAN TYLER:

Bear with me, the Traverse Theatre feels like a dad? Now, the Lyric Theatre is like my mother, the Traverse Theatre's like my dad. So my mother's like "oh stay at home, stay in Northern Ireland stay here”, whereas the Traverse Theatre's like "you

go, you work, you do this, we're gonna support you, we're always gonna be there”, and also it's just the place that’s given me the most opportunity at such an early age as a playwright. I really don't know where I'd be without the Traverse Theatre.

[AUDIO ENDS]