**Transcription**
**Anyone Can Write a Play, Episode 2 – Meghan Tyler**

Video (with closed captions): <https://youtu.be/8WZfLWQ7zds>

[♪ Upbeat electronic music]

MEGHAN TYLER:

Character character character character character character... guess what we're doing today Cathan?

CATHAN MCROBERTS:

Character?

MEGHAN:

Yeah! Hello my name is Meghan Tyler, and this is –

CATHAN:

Cathan McRoberts.

MEGHAN:

And welcome to the second episode of Anyone Can Write a Play. Now this would be the

opportune moment to do the Seven I's exercise that we covered in the first episode if you haven't done so already. If you have done so already, wonderful, well done you! If you haven't done so already, that's okay. Just pause this video, set yourself a minute timer

on each of the headers that we covered last week, and just do a minute on each one,

and then come back to us.

So this episode, we're going to focus on character and look at character, but before we do that, I'm aware that some people might be doing this, like, back to back, whereas I would have recommended that you take the week in between each one. Because I'm going to talk to you guys about mulling, and how important mulling is. Not for wine, but for playwriting.

So basically, we left off with our two words last week, and some sort of spit-ball ideas about what form our plays might take from our favourite word and our least favourite word. And over that week, you might have noticed that your brain has started to make little connections, make little snatches of dialogue or speech, or you might have steered away from your original idea and your brain might have just sort of gone on and done some of the work for you, in terms of what your play could be.

Now I tend to find that when I mull - I'm really bad for over-mulling sometimes, I can really sit on an idea for too long, so this exercise is great for me as well. But with mulling, I find that really tedious tasks are when the best sort of ideas happen, so that's like, cleaning dishes, or having a shower, or cleaning the floor. That's when things start to shift in the brain. So that's when little connections and little snatches of character and little snatches of dialogue start to really land. And if that's happened over the past week, great. If it's not, don't worry, because it will as time goes on.

Have you noticed that you've sort of mulled over things, this last week?

CATHAN:

Yeah a lot, I've been thinking about changing my original ideas, sending it maybe somewhere different, thinking about different characters, different reasons they could be wherever they are.

MEGHAN:

Yep. Right, amazing.

Good, so from that mulling, as I was saying last week we're natural storytellers, so our brains have already started to form stories, without us having to sit down and do it by ourselves. It will just naturally go there, because we're curious, creative, imaginative people.

So, right. Basically from there, we're gonna go back to our original words, and start to make some concrete decisions. So we've done a little bit of mulling for a week, and now from that mulling, we're going to ask some questions, and make some concrete decisions.

Okay, so, character. Now let's talk a little bit about character. I tend to prefer character-led theatre, character-led stories, just because I think it always connects more with an audience. When the characters are really clear, and the writer is really focused on who these people are. Now there are some plays where the character isn't the main thing, it's the overall message of the play, but I think that's slightly outdated, and from my practice, I don't see how you can't have an over-arching metaphor as well as some really strong characters.

The trick with characters is - I'm saying this an actor, you might also agree - is that you want to pick up a script, and the characters want to bounce off the page. Like you want to get a script and go, 'I really want to play this part,' you want characters that an actor will absolutely fall in love with. Because whenever you provide that, they give you more, and they find more within your script or text, and it just brings the play to life, in a completely beautiful way. So on that, what we're gonna do is really focus on our characters now, and really get some concrete decisions made from the words that we came up with last week. Ready?

I've done a lot of mulling over who my characters could be from the words we came up with last week. And so for this, I want you to go back to your words, and your lovely word maps. So at this stage we've decided something that excites us about this and we're going to work from there. So my two words were crispy and belch. Now you might have thought of other characters that aren't really related to these words over the last week. If you have done that's fine, but this is an exercise if you're not really sure what way to go, who's gonna be onstage, who you're gonna write for. This is an exercise to sort of spark that.

So what we're going to do is we're going to take our first word, our favourite word, so mine was crispy, and we're going to write it at the top of our page. Now, we're going to do a bit of imagination... imagination? Imaginating? Imaginating, is that a word?

CATHAN:

Imagining?

[Laughter]

MEGHAN:

Who's the playwright? [laughing] So we're gonna do, we're gonna imagine, so basically I want you to look at your word that you've written down, look at your favourite word. And I want you to say it out loud three times. So, crispy, crispy, crispy. Really hear it. Cathan would you like to do yours?

CATHAN:

Growth. Growth. Growth.

MEGHAN:

This is now your opportunity to say your word three times. So go! ... And go... And go!

Cool, so we've sent that out into the universe. So now what we're going to do is we're gonna close our eyes. And I want you to really think about your word. That word, that favourite word that you've picked. If you were to see someone walking down the street and you would come back and describe them as that word, who is that person? They're walking down the street, what does their walk look like? What's their disposition? What do they look like, do they look a bit shifty? Do they look quite confident? Just probe the image of that person, if they have the aura of our favourite word.

And open your eyes. So I have crispy as my favourite word. And the person that I saw is someone who's quite delicate, almost like if you pushed them they would break into a million pieces if they were to fall over. Like someone who's maybe quite closed-in, in demeanour. I also saw quite pointy features, like edges, there's edges to them. Cathan, what about you?

CATHAN:

So from growth I kind of saw this kind of... thirst for life kind of, exuberant, excited, energetic... healthy kind of... what do you call them, those people that kinda help you with life? Life coaches! I've got a life coach-style person. Real confident walking down the street, looking at everything and seeing life, not stuck in a phone.

MEGHAN:

That's great, you've actually hit on a title to describe them, like a life coach. So I would write that down. Now for you at home, for drawing out a character from this word, try to encapture them in something like life coach, so I don't know, like a guru. So for crispy, I would say the person that I'm seeing is... a delicate witch!

CATHAN:

A delicate witch.

[Laughter]

MEGHAN:

Yeah that's sort of the person I'm imagining. Imagining, why can't I say that word today? Okay so you've sort of maybe landed on someone now, and I would write it down, and put it in a box. So I've got crispy at the top of my page, and then I've put delicate witch here in this box. Whatever that may mean [laughter].

And now we're gonna move on to our least favourite word, from last week, and we're gonna repeat the same exercise, to draw out a character. So my least favourite word was belch. So I'm gonna say that three times: belch, belch, belch. Cathan?

CATHAN: Swelter, swelter, sssswelter.

MEGHAN:

God I hate it so much!

So now this is your opportunity at home, to say your word out loud to the universe three times. So...

Great. So now we're gonna close our eyes again, and if you came home, and you were telling someone that you saw this person walking down the street, and you described them as your least favourite word of the day, picture that person. Ask yourself, so for me I'm asking what a belch person looks like. Okay open your eyes. Now what my brain's done there is relate all I can see is this, and this happens with character, you relate to people you know, or used to know, and in my head I'm just thinking of the ice-cream man who used to serve me as a kid, me and my cousin, cos he used to pick his nose, and he had a really thick moustache and he was always scratching his bum and picking his hole and stuff. But he would give you ice-cream, and he reeked of fags and he was just quite a... like... quite a grotesque person. And I think that's sometimes the thing with character, it's really a lot easier if you kinda start to draw on people that you know. So Cathan, what about you then with your least favourite word?

CATHAN:

So swelter, I had this image of someone not comfortable where they are, someone a bit uncomfortable in their own body even, so they don't maybe take care of themselves, a bit greasy, a bit closed-off, not open like my other person. A little bit erratic maybe?

MEGHAN:

Cool, yeah.

CATHAN:

Unpredictable.

MEGHAN:

Great, yeah. Okay. So if you were to... like I've done with delicate witch, what would be your, 'this person is' boom? What would that be?

CATHAN:

This person is... a greasy, ah... nerve ball.

MEGHAN:

Great! Write that down. And I have grotesque ice-cream man. Amazing. So at this point you should have two characters, two pretty concrete characters that we've pulled out and imagined from your least favourite word and your most favourite word. Okay so now we've landed on two concrete characters. So mine are delicate witch, and grotesque ice cream man. And Cathan, yours are...?

CATHAN:

Life coach and greasy nerve ball.

MEGHAN:

Great. There's also some really nice natural contrasts coming out, which is what I secretly love about the favourite and least favourite word of the day. You're already causing a contrast, which means whatever you create from there causes a contrast. And contrasts in a play are juicy!

So before we move on with sketching our characters out, one thing I will say is if you look at the world of the arts, if you look at things on TV and the history of all time, forever and ever,

you'll see that straight white men... we've covered them, we've done them. And if the two people you've imagined or have landed on are two straight white men, I would highly encourage, for the sake of the future of the arts, that you do not do that. And that is really easily fixed, just swap the gender, swap their sexual orientation, swap the colour of their skin, but just don't write for two straight white men in this day and age. I shall not abide it, as the leader of this workshop! So yes, just make that little change now if you've landed on two straight white men from that last exercise we've done.

So, now moving on, after that little arts lecture there, we're going to sketch our characters out. So what we're going to do is figure out their name, their age, where they're from, all those kind of character profile things. Now what we're gonna do first is you're gonna write the title that you've given them at the top of another page. So take your favourite word first, so I'm writing delicate witch at the top of the page. You got...?

CATHAN:

Life coach.

MEGHAN:

At the top of your page. Great. So what we're now going to do is decide on their name. Now, I know there's a lot of plays where there's characters like A and B, or like Gill and Bob.

They might not... they might just be names that haven't really been thought about too much. But I would say that names, because we're doing character-led theatre here, I feel like a name should really capture the person, should really capture the character, should hold something, even if it's just for you, even if it's a secret between writer and character. So like, Alannah and Fianna, their names in Gaelic hold so much weight for me, and I think that's always a good way of starting with characters. Because when you have that meaning, in your head, of a name, it means that when you put pen to paper you're already seeing that meaning subliminally, every time you write their name. And it's just a reminder of who you wanted that person to be when you started.

So what we're going to do now is I want you to look at, well I've got delicate witch, but I want you to look at the title you've given your first character, who has come out of your favourite word. And we're going to spend two minutes doing a little bit of research, so there'll be a two-minute thing here, doing a little bit of research on what name you could name that character. I've got delicate witch, so I'm gonna be looking at maybe some people from history, who were maybe regarded as quite fragile. I'm gonna be looking at famous witches from history, I'm going to be saying names out loud that feel quite sharp, remember I was talking about those edges, from before. And I'm gonna look at something that either sounds like it sums up a delicate witch, or I'm going to get something that sort of means that. Cathan, what do you have?

CATHAN:

Life coach?

MEGHAN:

Life coach. So where would you be mining a name from, there? What do you think would be the research things that you would do to find the character's name?

CATHAN:

So I'm thinking looking up life coaches, like popular in the media. Like maybe someone with a ridiculous name that's not their given name, but a name they've taken on, that is the kind of description of them.

MEGHAN:

Yeah.

CATHAN:

Like embodies them in their name. Maybe a ridiculous name because they're a life coach...

MEGHAN:

Yeah.

CATHAN:

And I'm thinking things about growth. Like the first thing that springs to mind is 'summer'. So I don't know.

MEGHAN:

Yeah. And I think there's also room with the word growth for things that grow, like a lot of flowers and a lot of trees have names that could also be given to people as well. But yeah, so I want you to look at your word, and we're gonna do two minutes of research, where you're gonna look up who you could call this person. So baby name websites are great for this. But yes, we'll see you in two minutes.

So hopefully you've now landed on a name that you think works. So for my delicate witch, I've found from my research that there was an Irish witch that was nicknamed Biddy, which I really like. But her full name was Bridget, and I feel like that really fits in to this character. I also think that I've stumbled on a little nugget of gold there where I think someone could nickname her Biddy, and she doesn't like it. Like in quite a patronising way, and that could be - that WILL be, because it's a two-hander - the other character. So that's a wee potential side-plot that I've got. Cathan what about you?

CATHAN:

So I was looking up life coaches, and names inspired by nature and growth, and I wanted something quite ridiculous for the life coach thing, so I've gone with Blossom for a name.

Makes me think of names like Autumn.

MEGHAN:

I think that's a really good name.

CATHAN:

I like it!

MEGHAN:

Great, okay so now we're just gonna sort of do a bit of a character breakdown for them. We're gonna do a character profile for our first character. So for Biddy, their age... I'm gonna go for mid-thirties. Just again, a little politically, arts-charged point... there's not very many parts for women in their mid-thirties that aren't like... 'Mum'. And I'm trying to change that. Just so it's an offering. So I'm gonna have a woman in her mid-thirties. Cathan what about you?

CATHAN:

See I think if my life coach actually was a very good life coach I would maybe put them in their mid to late thirties. But I think my idea is that they're gonna be really quite new to this.

MEGHAN:

Okay.

CATHAN:

And there's maybe reasons in their life that they've came to this. So I'm thinking late twenties.

MEGHAN:

Okay.

CATHAN:

Kind of, find yourself before your thirties by helping other people, I don't know...?

MEGHAN:

You're having a meltdown [laughter]. Okay cool, great. So name, age, gender. I've got a woman.

CATHAN:

I've got a woman.

MEGHAN:

Yep. And then go to their job. What's their job? Now because mine is, well Cathan's is in his title, as a life coach, and I'm excited by my baking idea, for me they're going to be a baker. Because that ties in with the thing that excites me. So if their occupation isn't at the forefront of your mind, what's something that your title, what is the job they would do? And you could spit-ball this as there could be a couple, but it might not feed into the play at all, or there's lots of plays set in offices or at the workplace itself. So depending on where you are, just question and probe. If you don't have an occupation for them, where would their title fit?

So if I wasn't so keen, if I wasn't so in love with this baking idea, a delicate witch... I'm thinking of mums who describe their kids' teachers as 'oh that witch!' I've got that in my head, so I'm thinking of maybe a new teacher, that could be a different job a delicate witch has. Or a delicate witch maybe could be quite literal, her occupation is she is a witch. She is a healer. Yeah. So just spit-ball what that title could be, if the occupation isn't already at the forefront of your mind.

CATHAN:

[whispering] I've got mine! [Laughter]

MEGHAN:

And now I would ask where they're from. One thing I'll say again, another political clang,

is that I absolutely adore plays that are set in a regional place. Not London. Not, y'know, New York. Somewhere like, Newry in Northern Ireland, for me I love setting things in my home town, and I would actively encourage you to pick a place that maybe you're from, because I think that we are still lacking in plays from other places across the UK. So I'm gonna say that my baker is from Newry. That's easy for me! What about you Cathan?

CATHAN:

Well, I think I can safely say that no one's ever been from Newtonards in a play or on TV.

So I'm gonna go with Newtonards.

MEGHAN:

Great. Wonderful. And now we're going to decide what their sexuality is. Might not matter, might not be part of the play that you're writing, but just for your own benefit, it's good to know what their sexuality is. I'm gonna have a queer woman. What about yourself Cathan?

CATHAN:

I'm gonna have a straight, heterosexual woman.

MEGHAN:

Grand. Now we're gonna spend two minutes on this, it's a little sort of exercise. I want you to write, in this - did I say two minute or one minute?

CATHAN: Two minutes.

MEGHAN:

In this two minute exercise, I want you to write a want they have, a need that they have, and a secret that they have. Like a want that I have is that I want... I want lockdown to be over. A need that I have is the need for the structure of the government to change, so that lockdown will be over. And a secret that I have is that I'm not gonna do it, because it's a secret! [Laughter]

So, just think in relation to yourself, what's something you want overall in relation to your life? And something that's a secret to you? And wants and needs can sometimes be completely in opposition, they can sometimes be really intrinsically related. But a want might not be good for the person, but it's what they want. Whereas a need is something that will change them. A want might not necessary change them, whereas a need would change them. Is that clear?

CATHAN:

Yes.

MEGHAN:

Okay cool. So we're gonna spend two minutes - timer! - for our first character, a want, a need, and a secret. Go!

CATHAN:

Two minutes up!

MEGHAN:

Great, good work guys. So for Biddy, Bridget, my delicate witch baker, her want is to be the best baker. Her need is for the patriarchy to be dismantled so she can be the best baker. And a secret is, she routinely orders Dominoes.

CATHAN:

A girl after your own heart.

MEGHAN:

What about you?

CATHAN:

So, for my want - sorry, for Blossom's want - she wants to help people be their best. She needs to feel worthiness. And her secret is that she once stole pick and mix from Woolworths in Newtonards.

MEGHAN:

I love that!

CATHAN:

She's held that with her for her whole life.

MEGHAN:

Love it, great. Wonderful, so now to move on to character number two! So we're gonna do much the same as we did before. So character number two, you're least favourite word, the title that you've created from your least favourite word, so mine was grotesque ice-cream man. And we're now gonna do our name research. So again, think of a name that captures that title, captures that person you saw in your head. If you need to go look up 'names that mean,' do that. Baby name websites are good for this. We're gonna take two minutes again, right now, to do a little bit of research, and then we'll rock and roll with our second character breakdown.

So after those two minutes, you should have landed on a name. I had grotesque ice-cream man as my title, so what I did was I went back, and I just sat back and thought of people who make me feel a bit gross. And I landed on Harvey Weinstein. So Harvey for me is the name. Not that I'm immortalising that monster, but Harvey I think also has the connotations with Sabrina the Teenage Witch, like quite a handsome looking person, which is also quite a nice juxtaposition. So that's where I've landed. A name that can be both grotesque and quite charming. So, what about you Cathan?

CATHAN:

I went down the road of looking up, so I've got greasy nerve ball, so I was thinking grotesque characters, horrible characters from movies or TV, and I came across this grotesque creature from a movie called Bad Milo,

MEGHAN:

Okay!

CATHAN:

It's called Milo. So I'm gonna go with Milo.

MEGHAN:

I love that, that's great. So now let's go through their character profile. So their age, I'm gonna go with mid-thirties again. Because I think, the idea that I've mulled over the last week is that maybe, they're two people who started off in the same position, but one has done better than the other. That's where my brain is going to, so I'm thinking that this character Harvey is mid-thirties. Cathan what about you?

CATHAN:

So for Milo I'm thinking he's a bit older, I like the idea of kind of, the juxtaposition of two different generations.

MEGHAN:

Oh yeah.

CATHAN:

And I like the fact that Blossom's gonna be late twenties, that kinda generation, our generation, and Milo is older generation, maybe just a generation ahead. Maybe fifty... early fifties maybe.

MEGHAN:

I like that. I like that juxtaposition. Gender? ... Man.

CATHAN:

Yeah, I gotta man.

MEGHAN:

I got a cis man. And job? Again this is quite easy for me because it's a baking competition, so I'm going to go for another baker. Cathan?

CATHAN:

Well, yeah, job. What is his job? It's funny, I saw him working in the social security agency.

MEGHAN:

Oh! Can you talk through why you've landed, how you've landed there?

CATHAN:

Um, okay. I don't know if there's much logic to it, apart from the fact that when I was younger and I used to go to the social security agency, in Newtonards, there were some real characters sat behind the desks. There were some that you would be delighted to get, that you knew would be really helpful, but there were some that you didn't want to be anywhere near because the smell alone was bad enough to put you off. [Laughter] So that's how I landed there. And I guess a lot of... You see some characters there.

MEGHAN:

Working behind the desk, yeah.

CATHAN: Not even behind the desk-

MEGHAN:

And yeah coming in as well. And then you're one of them too!

CATHAN:

I mean you're in Newtonards in a social security office, so...

MEGHAN:

Yeah, yeah. So that's good, that's really good. I like that. I think Cathan's hit on something there, which is jobs that you have retained from your head, from your own personal experience. Your own personal experience is so important for playwriting. Like so important for figuring out characters, because everything we draw on, everything we create comes from our own lives, whether we like it or not.

Awesome. So we've done jobs. Where are they from? Well I quite like contrasts, so I think, what's the polar opposite if Newry? That's gotta be somewhere like Oxford, or Kent. Somewhere that's quite...

CATHAN:

The New Forest?

MEGHAN:

The New Forest! [laughter] Yeah, I'm gonna go for Oxford. What about you Cathan?

CATHAN:

I think it has to be Newtonards.

MEGHAN:

Yep.

CATHAN:

I think it has to be, because then you've got the juxtaposition of the two people from the same place, from different generations, with very different trajectory.

MEGHAN:

You've also just hit on something there, which is like these character profiles… It will be really interesting what is similar, and what is different. We're gonna do sexuality first, and then I'll touch back on that. Sexuality: straight. For Harvey over here.

CATHAN: Umm... asexual?

MEGHAN:

Yeah.

CATHAN:

Yeah pretty sure, I think he's asexual.

MEGHAN:

Great. And now, so basically... it's interesting what we land on with our two characters here. Some things are similar. Some things are the complete polar opposite. And I think that's really good for a two-hander, or two characters, because there can be similarities, like I've got two bakers, they're in their mid-thirties, but I've also got one from Oxford, one from Newry, there's already a complete culture clash there, that's gonna be interesting to explore. I've got one who's straight, one who's queer, again that's gonna be an interesting

juxtaposition to explore. Great. Cathan? You've got two people from Newtonards, who have different jobs.

CATHAN:

Very different jobs, very different outlooks. One is maybe quite sexual, and the other isn't sexual at all.

MEGHAN:

Yeah. Great. So it's a really good opportunity just to look through those two pages and just take note in your brain of what's similar and what's dissimilar. Because that's where we're gonna mine lots of juicy stuff when we're creating content. But now onto our exercise. So.

Cathan can you set a two minute timer please? So for two minutes, and once again for our second character, we're going to write a want, a need, and a secret. So a want, a need, and a secret.

CATHAN:

Okay. Are we ready?

MEGHAN:

I believe we are.

CATHAN:

Let's go!

Two.. one... go!

MEGHAN:

Okay cool. So, wants, needs, secrets. I've discovered something really, really interesting now, but my want, from Harvey, is he wants to be unstoppable. A need that he has is to thin out the competition. And a secret is he stole his recipes. Which I think... some secrets can absolutely not add anything to a play, but that's something that I've stumbled upon that I'm like, interesting. So what about you Cathan?

CATHAN:

So his want is to be loved.

MEGHAN:

Aw, yeah.

CATHAN:

He may be asexual but he can still love.

MEGHAN:

Of course!

CATHAN:

Need, to have a sense of purpose. I think that's why he does the job he does, because he feels it's helping in some respect. And his secret is that he was in love with his cook at school.

MEGHAN:

Aww!

CATHAN:

Because she was the one that showed him, I guess care, through giving him every day.

MEGHAN:

Okay I'm in love with Milo. Oh- [sirens pass] - just emergency services. Okay great. So we've got our two profiles for our two characters, we should now have more of an understanding of what thing we're going to land them in. Or how these two people are going to interact. So if we think back to our exciting thing, so now I've landed on there's going to be a baking competition. With these two people involved somehow. I don't know if that's maybe one of them's a judge, and the other one isn't, what's the power play there? But that's the situation, the two characters that I've really landed on, over the course of this exercise. Cathan what about you?

CATHAN:

So, um... I mean these guys obviously are gonna interact. I'm not sure if... not sure yet if he comes to her or she comes to him. She spots him maybe. Yeah I don't know if I'm setting it in the social security agency office, if she had to go there because the life coaching isn't working, or if she's just starting to it and that's her - you know when you go to the social security agency and they say what's your job? And you say I'm an actor and they go, ‘No, but okay, what job?’ So that's like, that could be the same thing for her, she's going, 'Well I'm a life coach,' and they're like, okay but like really, what are you gonna do? So that could be where they meet. Maybe something happens there.

MEGHAN:

Great. Good. Good work, good work everyone. So, yeah. Basically now we've got two concrete characters. And that is gonna be awesome for building upon, it's gonna be awesome for just like finding out how these two interact with each other in the same room.

That's something I'm going to sort of plant in your brains, just to mull over. Not as homework, but just to mull over this next week.

How do these people speak, and how would they interact with each other? Just as a thought exercise, how would they interact with each other? Now there's questions there of, do they know each other, previously? Are they complete strangers? Now if they already know each other, then there's a history there that you need to work out, and if they're strangers... what's quite nice about strangers is from the audience's perspective, they're seeing the newness, the introductions for the first time, which is also quite joyous. But when there's two people who are landed with a history, there's more working out for an audience, as to what has happened in the past, what the past has meant.

And another question I'd say to mull over is why these two characters meet now. In the world of your play, why are these two characters meeting now? Why now? Always think about why now? What is the reason for now?

Great. So that sort of is us for this second episode, and next week we're going to start working out some plot and some dialogue and other fun things. [Laughter] So if you have any questions, please feel free to message me on twitter and yeah, we'll see you next week! Thank you so much for joining us. Be thinking over your characters, and see you later - bye!