**Transcription**
**Anyone Can Write a Play, Episode 4 – Meghan Tyler**

Video (with closed captions): <https://youtu.be/iL9Bcjy2Fq4>

[♪ Upbeat electronic music]

MEGHAN:

Hello and welcome to the fourth and final workshop of Anyone Can Write a Play. I'm Meghan Tyler, this is-

CATHAN:

Cathan McRoberts.

MEGHAN:

Thank you so much for doing this whole workshop with us. I know I've learned a lot. Have you learned a lot? [CATHAN SHAKES HEAD]

MEGHAN:

Great.

CATHAN:

I have really.

MEGHAN:

This is the perfect time to go and do the Seven I's exercise if you haven't done already, and if you have done already we can continue to rock and roll.

Okay so now you've done your Seven I's exercise, I want us to talk about the task you were set last week, which was to write, just bash out a play in half an hour, bash out those 15 pages.

Now I'm aware that was an impossible task. Like you would be writing a page every two minutes if you were to keep up with that rate, and that is impossible! But the reason that I wanted you guys to aim for that was to learn to just bash things out, get writing as quickly as you possibly could, and to just see what you came up with in those moments, with that time pressure. Because some of it will be golden and some of it will be a bit gross and sticky.

Also because of the impossible task I wanted you guys to become less precious, because I feel like a lot of people, when they first approach writing, they sit down and they're like every line has to be so particular and so precious. That's not the key to playwriting. The key to playwriting, I think, is to chuck shit at a wall first, and then to edit. But what we're going to do now is if you have completed 14, 15 pages over this last week, congratulations, give yourself a little pat on the back. If you haven't, that's okay because everyone gets stuck, everyone works differently and we're gonna chat today about how to feel less sticky. And just talk little tips and tricks to sort of move your play along.

But what we're going to do now is we're going to pause this video, and I want you to go back and read what you've written, aloud to yourself. So we're going to go back and read what we've written aloud to ourselves, and I just want you to notice what you like, I want you to notice what you don't like so much, and then we'll come back and we'll talk about that.

Okay so we've now read our draft zeros out loud by ourselves, and what I've noticed about mine, and this is sort of the rule I think with every draft zero, is there's some things that I'm like, absolutely yes, that's a really good representation of their relationship. However, it does just feel like my characters are like stating the obvious response in the time, and there's no real nuance, there's no real subtext. There's maybe a little sprinkle of subtext but nothing that has been properly mined, hasn't been dug deep in there, it's just like if two toddlers were on the stage and it was like, 'I don't like your nose.' 'Well I don't like your face.' It's kind of really obvious statements that they're making, instead of teasing it out. What about you Cathan, what did you notice?

CATHAN:

Umm, well a lot of that. It was very, I need to write this to get to here, I know where I'm trying to go, so how do I get there? And it was obvious, but at least it gets you moving on I guess. And then I also noticed there was a lot of bits where I got so stuck for so long on one line, let alone one page! And yeah, I'd be stuck there for ages and then something would come to me, and or even the next line would come to me, and I'd be kind of like uh... but then from there I would have a kind of knock on effect, and it would push me on for another couple of pages

until I get stuck again, and then back to that same place where it's like...

Sometimes it took a bit of research or inspiration to get me moving on, and sometimes it was just sitting really thinking and actually re-reading back what I had already written really often helped me to move forward again, because sometimes I was so stuck in that one line and then got it, and was like okay I don't know where to go from here. Does that make sense?

MEGHAN:

That's totally, that is playwrighting to a tee! The value of reading back and reading how your characters have gotten to the point where you're stuck, can often help so much. However, what we're going to spend the next two minutes doing, now that we've all read our drafts, is I want you to pick three things that you liked and three things that you didn't like so much. So, I'm gonna start a timer and your two minutes start now.

And just sort of stop off wherever you are.

Okay so, my three things that I liked... Harvey's characterization really comes through. I feel like I got really quite well his talking in long sentences. Number two, I really liked the baking commentary, a bit of baking stuff in there was great. And number three, I really liked my beginning, I thought the beginning really summed up my characters quite well. Things I didn't like, I disliked Bridget, which isn't my intention for this, but upon rereading I disliked the character who I would say is my main character, which I'm not keen on. So she needs a bit more work. Number two, the middle is very meh! The middle is, and this is where my number three comes in, because the stakes aren't high enough. So there's no stakes, there's no risk, there's no pressure on these people. The pressure's not enough, there needs to be more, and so that's what I need to look at going forward. Cathan, what about you?

CATHAN:

So I liked the comedy and the difference between the two characters. I thought that came through quite well. I liked the way that Summer uses mantras and sayings.

MEGHAN:

Yeah.

CATHAN:

I don't know why I like that. This isn't so much script, but I really like Summer's surname. She's Summer Shields and she's from Newt nards. It's one of the most popular surnames, Irish surnames, and I just really liked how Summer Shields worked, especially as someone who wanted to be a life coach.

MEGHAN:

Right.

CATHAN:

Dislikes... Reactions or dialogue that didn't seem to fit the character if you know what I mean.

So there was things that I was writing to move forward, but then looking back at it, it wouldn't be, that person would never have said that, or would never have reacted that way.

MEGHAN:

Yeah.

CATHAN:

I still haven't decided on Milo's pet. I really don't know what, I want them to have a slightly obscure pet, so I don't like the fact that I haven't decided. Within the script it just comes to them talking about it, and there's always a blank where they're saying what it is or whatever they're called. And obvious ending. It's just too boring and obvious at the moment. I think it's just like your 'meh' middle.

MEGHAN:

A meh ending. Yeah there's always going to be a lot of meh with a draft zero, but we're going to talk about... basically, I want you to think about the characters that you've landed on and reflect on how they've come, how they've journeyed through your story. So basically your character needs to have an arc by the end of the story, they should be completely changed to how they were at the start of the story, because that's what an audience wants to see. And so the question I pose, the question I want us to answer now is what are their weaknesses? What are your character’s flaws?

So we're going to spend a minute on our first character, and we're gonna spend a minute on our second character. So I want you to think about what their flaws are, okay? So you ready? Okay, so we're starting a timer, three two one go.

Okay and just stop wherever you are.

So basically, these flaws throughout your draft, what I want you to focus on the next time you look at it, next time you visit it, is how you can poke - you as the writer, you as the conductor of this orchestra - how you can poke at their flaws, how you can drive them into their flaws, and how you can put stresses and strains on them, so that their flaws really come out. Because part of the reason that we go to the theatre to experience live performance is we want to see flawed characters on a stage. We don't want to see characters where everything's perfect, we don't want to see characters where everything is nice and easy going. We want to see flaws because we all recognise that we're inherently flawed.

So really try to twist your characters as much as possible. I'm not someone who's kind to my characters. Don't be kind to your characters. Drive them to their furthest edge, and really prod at those flaws. To do that now that we're talking about strains. I just want to talk about another way you can go into your next draft of your play, is to put them under other strains. So not just human strains, but to put them under different conditional strains. So I'm just going to sort of list some, and so I would say things that jar on their senses, so think about human senses. So that would be their sense of smell, their sense of taste, what they feel, what they hear, what they see, and what can you impact as the playwright? What can you change?

And if you really sit and think, if they're both, if both of my characters are going into this and

there's a foul smell in the room, how does that change how they speak? Or if I'm going into this and there's like really loud noise, how does that change how they speak? And I would also then talk about human conditions in terms of strain, so I'm talking, I'm talking injuries, I'm talking about the temperature in the room, I'm talking about hunger, I'm talking about being tired, being thirsty, being itchy, being hungover, being drunk... What can you change in their human condition going into your next draft, that will impact how they speak and how they act?

So me thinking about my draft zero, if I put in that Harvey's tired, so at the moment he's quite a pompous, speaking in quite long sentences, like knows what he's at, knows what he's doing character. If I put tired onto him, does that mean he loses his edge slightly quicker? Like how does that impact on the structure of the play? So yeah, just think that over. As soon as you start to change the little things with them, that's when their character sort of starts to flesh them out. You're just sort of chucking them from one experimental pot to the other, and they start to become clear to you.

Now on this, I'm aware that I've been talking about drafting and draft zero without actually talking about re-drafting. And so re-drafting is where the work comes. And re-drafting is, I mean I think I know myself, in my early days I would have maybe finished a draft of the play and would have been like it's perfect, read it, and then would have gotten notes back on it would have been like, what do you mean notes, I don't understand, what's up? I've gone over this and I've thought about this and I've done, like what?

But redrafting is so fundamental for playwriting because you're basically, what you're doing... like let's not pretend it's not a pain in the hole. It is painful. But what you're doing, it's a puzzle of discovery and you're like the puzzle master. And it's a puzzle of your own discovery because it's your story that you're telling, and every time you approach a redraft you find more things, you find new things. And that's what makes the play better, because no human being on this planet is going to sit down and write something, and write a play and it's going to be gorgeous the first time round. That's just not gonna happen. So re-drafting is so important and so fundamental.

And I would try to take the pressure off yourselves of thinking, oh my gosh what I have to do like eight redrafts, 12 redrafts, sometimes like 30 redrafts! But that's what it takes, and it doesn't have to be a scary thing if you just go in and change a small element each and every time. Just think of it as playing around, you're just experimenting, you're just the puzzle master who is using all these pieces together. But yes, redrafting is very important.

But now what we're going to do, on that redrafting thing is I want you to think about four big things in your play, like four big things. So my four big things would be bakery, baking. Patriarchy. Revenge, and death. Cathan, what about you, what would be four big things?

CATHAN:

Um, mental health. Uh, growth. Loss. And... Rebirth, maybe?

MEGHAN:

Great, okay. So write those down. Now I want you at home to think about the four big things of your play and I want you to write them down. Now this exercise is going to be very similar to our initial exercise that we did, of our favourite word and our least favourite word, where we made our little word vomit maps. So we're going to do the exact same thing with these four words. So I've got bakery or baking, I've got patriarchy, I've got revenge and I've got death.

What we're going to do, now I sort of encourage that with this workshop you would spend more than a minute on this, on these lists. But we're going to do lists of connected words, that same thing we did with our least favourite word and our most favourite word. So we're going to do a minute on all four of them but once again I would suggest in your own time, you would just spend as long as you can, really mining all the different words you can get out of these four big words, the four big things of your plays. So I'm going to start a timer. You ready? You ready? Are we all ready? Okay, three two one. Go.

Move on to your next one.

Oh, start your next word, your third word.

Move on to your fourth big thing.

Oh! That's it, that's our time.

Okay well done. So basically these are four big things, these are word maps of four big things. And what I tend to do with the four big things is thread them in. So basically there'll be a point in the play where you sort of want to hint at the ending, or give a taster of the ending without blatantly saying what's going to happen at the end. Or you want to thread in what's going to happen all along, and I find that this is the greatest way of doing it. Because you're just going to sort of substitute language out.

Now what's been really interesting for me is, I want you to look at your four big things

and notice things that fit within each other that you weren't expecting. Let your mind have a little bit of creative license here. So basically I've sort of clocked, between baking and death, that I've got dust and air underneath death, and those words could fit into baking. So like a dusting or an air bubble. And it's just, there's a thing here with knives, is a common thing. It's just interesting to sort of pinpoint where things could cross over. But how you can merge one into the other as well.

So taking that dust, or that's how the cookie crumbles I've got written down instead of like 'well that's the way it was.' Whenever Harvey says a sentence about that being the way it was back in the day, instead because it's a baking competition, he could say that's how the cookie crumbles. It's just about flipping language, changing the odd word to get your sort of four big things or themes into your play. It's just a little tip, it's just a little trick to sort of go through and see, oh instead of how are you doing, can I change that so that it includes my theme? Could I? There's a bit of a big game of could I? Yeah that's just another little thing to give your plays a little bit more sprinkling of depth.

So now we've covered that, we're going to just, before we shoot off, talk a little bit about the conditions of where you write, and talk a little bit about technical jargon that people don't really tell you, but I think you should know, when you approach playwriting in the future.

Okay, so we're sort of reaching the end of our four week workshop, which is a shame because I've had lots of fun. It'd be more fun if I was in a room with you guys, but this has been lovely too. But I basically want to talk a little bit about where you write, where you position yourself, where you write. I often find that it's good to do a bit of a - this is going to sound a bit witchy,

but do a bit of a clearing of the space. Give it a wee sweep, wipe down the table that you're

working at and just set yourself up in a really nice way for working.

If you're working during the daytime, natural light is really lovely. If you can do it facing a window I feel like that often helps, especially if you can see the street, and you'll find yourself sort of people watching for a bit and then that could spark something. I would also recommend if you're writing in the night time, just have a really soft light. And get flux on your laptop or your computer or your device, because you don't want to be looking at something that's going to be straining your eyes if you're working late into the night. There's some people who are like daytime writers, and then there's people like me who are like goth night-time writers because we're clichés.

And I just want to talk about, like light a couple of candles, get the smell in the room, just a nice settled place to be able to focus and begin. And I would also recommend just routine breaks, don't sit and go I'm going to write for six hours and I'm not gonna move apart from going to the bathroom. I used to do that and it's really damaging to your state of mind. Get out, go out into nature, set yourself a break for like 15 minutes to leave the house and go into a park and see some other things other than a screen.

Those are just a few like self-care things that I think are important for writing. Also you'll be sat like this most of the time, so remember to take little periodical stretches, and stretch out your neck and your wrists and your back especially. Because otherwise you'll get a hunch, and that's not what anyone wants. So right, we've talked a wee bit about self-care, and now I just want to touch on some technical jargon for playwriting. So if you're working in a word document, I'm just gonna talk about, bit by bit by bit, what the usual format is for things.

So normally your first page, you have your title, it's your title page. And beneath that is the number of draft that you're on, the month and year that draft has been completed, and your name. Second page is a character page, so that's when you give your characters their names, their ages, their sexuality, their colour of their skin, maybe a wee bit about them sometimes, but sometimes it's more fun for the reader to find out a wee bit more about them as they're going on. On that page sometimes, if the character list is quite small, you will also have where

your play is set, that'd be setting. So my play Crocodile Fever was set in South Armagh,

and you would have the year as well, so that was 1989.

And then moving swiftly on there, you come to your next page, which is where you start to begin your play. Now most plays, though this is a thing that's sort of still here, still isn't, most plays when you begin them begin with stage directions. Stage directions are written in italics, and character names are written in capital letter, whenever you're writing stage directions.

And moving on from that, you're going to have your characters' names down the side of the page as you write, and make a space for their speech. I know that's a little bit tricky. It is just that one tab bar, you write their name, do a tab, just make sure their names are nice and lined up with each other, as they are characters. And also I would say to do double spacing. Double spacing is really good, it means that when you print it out for the first time you can take proper notes. It's also just easier to read. And page numbers, whack some page numbers on there, they're very very useful. It's also very good to know when you think you've maybe written something that's like 30 pages, it's good to actually see, oh no, oops, yeah that's going to be an hour long, not what I thought.

Yeah, so those are just some technical things. But we did say a word that really excites me, and that's title. So the title of your play. I love a good title. I mean, most people would love a really good title, but there's a certain number of ways to go about your title. So I really like to sort of sum up my play in the title. So Crocodile Fever, fire and crocodiles, like that's pretty much that play. But yeah, also The Persians, that was all about the ancient Persians, and the myth that they drank to decide on really important political things, and then they all had to agree when they were hungover as well, and it was called The Persians. And that was a little sort of, 'this is going to happen to these three politicians in modern day.'

But let's just talk generally about titles. So I really like snappy titles, I like titles that are quite punchy, but that's not always the way that things need to go. So there's a thing where they could be really short, or really long. So if I was to call my play a really short title that I thought was a bit cool, a bit sexy, it might be Batter. That speaks to baking, but it also speaks to the

act of battering someone. Whereas if I was to go for a really long title it might be, The Story of Biddy and How She Baked Herself Into a Competition Then Murdered... you know those really long chunky titles that you get, that ends up being shortened in nickname anyway.

Then there's also things about songs. So if there's a song that has inspired you as you've been writing, I sometimes, as a little ode, I've done that with Medicine. Medicine was a song that meant a lot to me, as I was listening to it, as I was writing the play, and as a little tip my cap ode to it, Medicine became the title of that play over time. There's also the instructions title which is like, Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner. That's an instruction. There's different ones that do that kind of thing, different plays that do that same thing. Protagonist's name, classic. Hamlet, Macbeth... Well there's not really much more to say about that [laughter]. There's also the classic line from the play, or the witty remark. The one that like you point and go 'that's the name of the play!' [laughter]

CATHAN:

But surprisingly happens a lot.

MEGHAN:

It happens a lot in plays. And I'm always that dickhead who goes 'that's the name of the play!' Then there's also hidden ideas. So hidden ideas that might never be said in the play, it might never be referenced to, it might have nothing to do with the themes or the people, but that's the hidden idea that the writer might hold really dear to themselves. Another title that you can land on is like a geographical location, which sometimes has a lot to do with the play and sometimes has -all to do with the play. But a geographical location is another one that people tend to land on. Place names, where places are. Yes.

So that is sort of us summing up some ideas about titles, and about the technical jargon, and about just self-care whenever you're writing. That's us finished this workshop series. I would say whenever you're writing, read your stuff out loud, read it out loud, and then read it out loud again. In terms of your moving from draft zero to first draft, when you arrive at first draft I want you to put it away, and I don't want you to look at it for like a month. And then I want you to go back to it. Don't look at it! Even if you want to, do not look at it. Put it away, come back to it, and then I want you to take it out, and I want you to read it out loud again. Because when you do that you sort of go, did I write that? Oh, yas! Or you go, that bit, what is that? I really need to fix that. And it becomes clearer with more time than a week would ever do. So yes, as soon as you arrive at draft one, put it away, don't think about it, don't look at it, then take it out again after some time.

And that's sort of all I've got to say really. Thank you so much for taking part in this workshop series. I hope you guys got a lot out of it. I would love to read what you've come up with. I've had a wee buzz about seeing some of the creative ideas that have already come out so far. But yeah, I just want to say well done guys. It's a mad old world out there, and to be creative in any way at all is something to be so utterly proud of yourself for. So I'm bloody proud of you, I'm proud of you, I'm proud of all of us. And I can't wait to see you guys in the theatre when we get back. So yeah, until then, thank you very much Cathan.

CATHAN:

Thank you very much Meghan. A round of applause.

MEGHAN:

You've been a very good guinea pig.

And thank you very much people at home. Yeah. So now, keep writing! Go do it! Smash it, grrrr, you got this!

Final final final sign off from me. I just want to say thank you so much for watching. This episode, and all the episodes of Anyone Can Write a Play, is part of the Traverse Theatre's First Stages Festival. If you have any questions just stick them in the comment section below, or tweet @traversetheatre and we'll help you out.

Just thinking on progressing your playwriting more, I am but one playwright. So if you're looking for more opportunities to develop your playwriting, check out the Get Involved section on the Traverse website, because there's a ton of resources that will help you out. You can also sign up to the digital newsletters just so that you can hear more about the opportunities and what else they've got coming up, etc etc. And lastly, if you'd like to help the Traverse continue the brilliant work that they do, you can make a donation and find out more about supporting them on their website.

So yeah, that's it from this one over here. Have a wonderful rest of your writing lives, and you're playwrights now so I expect to see your work pretty goddamn soon. Thank you so much guys, stay safe and sane, and keep doing it.