**Building Blocks: How To Structure Your Story**

**Episode 2: Act 1: Building the Start**

Video (with closed captions): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WL3iHhUOXI&t=750s>

Hello, I'm Michael Patrick,

and I'm Oisín Kearney and welcome to video two in our workshop series.

If you've not watched our first video, we gave a quick overview of story structure, including the hero's journey, please do go back and give it a watch, because it might help you have a better idea. But what we're going to talk about today,

so this video today is all about openings. What we'll talk about is act one in a three act

structure. So the hero's journey in Act One, is broken up into the ordinary world, the inciting incident, the refusal of the quest and

the choosal of the quest, or the act, one climax.

So jumping in starting from the very beginning, ordinary world, this is the very first thing in the hero's journey, it's the beginning of the beginning, and the start of your act one.

So it's 'Once upon a time...' So your first act should

typically start with exposition, that gives us the information we need to understand the story. That's your who, your what your when, and your where. So a good story will do this efficiently. And only really give you what you need to know.

And this is where you'll establish your main character, or the ensemble. You want to showcase their personality traits, their potential for future character development, and maybe their flaws and their weaknesses as well.

Yeah. And ideally, your character should have clear goals and desires that will result in actions which can drive the story that might not need to be clear to your audience. As long as you know, they're clear.

So the ordinary world is a good place as well to think about the tone of your piece. Is it a serious drama? Or is it a comedy? What are the themes you want to explore, make sure that all of that is present in the ordinary world

Yeah, and you should hook us in, you know, it's the opening of your piece, a good way to think about it is what is the promise you are making to your audience for what is to come.

You want to set up your characters and your themes but you will also want to set up the world that they inhabit. So there are two things that become very important for setting the world time and place. So we're going

to start with place. So a place is not just a backdrop to your story, it's not just a nice place to look at, it should suit the story and do something that changes it and try and be creative. It doesn't

have to be wacky and wonderful. You don't have to set all your plays on the moon or underwater, although that was pretty good. You just need to be specific about it. So if you've got a story about a hotel you're wanting to do,

well could be an old hotel, which used to be very grand and opulent. But it's now fallen on very hard times, yeah or maybe it's brand new and it hasn't opened yet. Or it could be a ruin of a hotel, could be a hotel in an area with a high crime rate.

When you're thinking about your place. Just Just think about the specificity of what you want it to be and how that's going to impact your characters. That's the key thing. How would a place that you set your story and change the characters or put pressure on them to change?

Yeah, because if you don't set it in a place where your characters have to modify

their behaviour, you can set it anywhere. But how do we come up with a place which can affect your character's behaviour. So this brings us to our first exercise, shall we go to the flip chart? Let's go to the flip chart. Thank you for joining us at the flip chart for our first exercise coming up with places.

So think of a character either one and a player you're currently writing or one of your favourite characters from a story or even someone you know, write down three places where your character would do the following.

Hide, whisper, laugh, pretend, pray, indulge, shop. The important thing is these are all places where their behaviour is being changed. So

pause the video and give that a go and come back when you're done. We're going to have a wee go too. Cheers!

Okay, so, Mick what did you come up with?

I thought of a character in a play that we're currently writing, and

I thought of some stuff and what stood out to me was pretend. I had an idea for one of our characters being in a children's ward at a hospital and trying to put on a brave face so their children won't see how sad they are. Oh, yeah, pretty good. Really cheery.

Okay, so I went with laugh. And I was thinking about what characters or what places you could put these characters in. And so I was thinking of a person inappropriately laughing in a classroom. And maybe it was a you know, a student who was laughing and then they got told off by their teacher, and I was thinking of someone laughing at a funeral. You know, upsetting the mourners, and I was thinking of someone laughing at a massage parlour because the masseuse was giving them tickles.

Yeah, so hopefully this can give you a list of different locations where your characters might behave differently. And you don't need to limit yourself to these think of any actions and try and come up with lists for them. Could one of these places be a place where you can set your play?

Or one of the many places in your play? Explain that to me Oisín? You don't just need to set it in one place, you could set loads of different places You could decide to set your play in multiple locations. Generally speaking, though, there are three categories of place when it comes to writing your play and setting lots of different locations. So

let's FLIP THE CHART.

You were supposed to chant that with me; FLIP THE CHART, FLIP THE CHART

Okay, so we have closed place, all the action

takes place in a single location.

Think of your famous Kitchen Sink drama, Look Back in Anger, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf or Ulster American

all taking place in the same place? Then we have open place, the action moves to different locations or a new location, every scene,

most classical plays would have this most Shakespeares, Chekhov would have this as well. And your play Mr. Burns, for example, it has-

My play? I didn't write Mr. Burns? Well... did I say it was yours? You said your play. I thought you wrote it. No. So that's a newer play that would have three acts and three different locations.

And then poetic place, this is a bit different, it's, it's kind of not clear where the locations are, it's a bit more fluid, you know, a character can be present talking to the audience, they can go back to a different place. And then another place that kind of moves fluidly.

A lot of one person shows would have that kind of jumping around in the story. So you don't know what location they're in. They're in lots of locations and the same location,

yeah, it's poetic. And that brings us to the second part of Time and Place time. And this isn't just the duration of the story or where it's set, but also how time is experienced by the audience.

So you as the dramatist, if you're writing a play or telling a story, you need to decide what you're going to show. What's the best time to jump in on the story? How late can you join your protagonist? And how should time be experienced?

You know, is it real time? Are you seeing the last hour of a 10 year relationship? Are you taking an entire year and squeezing it into an hour, you know, what do you want to do?

And similarly to place the same principles apply to time. So there are three types of time that you can choose from in a play

the exact same closed time where the action takes place in the same time the audience sees real time, continuous time, no jumps. So

that's single act pressure cooker plays like The Dumb Waiter for example,

yeah. Then open time, the action can move around in time, either forward or backwards.

This can be straightforward, like a Shakespeare each scene jumps ahead in time, or in Mr. Burns that you didn't write, which I've learned now, that's where each scene not only changes place, but also changes time. There's also Harold Pinter's Betrayal, where each scene moves backwards in time, the principle being that it's changing time in every scene,

every scene time changes. And the final one poetic time, where you don't really know when something is, you know, again, a character might talk to the audience, they might flashback to their childhood and then come forward to their future, they might jump further back before they're even born, it's just things are a bit more poetic.

Again, a lot of one person plays or non traditional plays would have that where you're kind of moving around, and it's a bit more poetic in its treatment of time.

So the next time you read or see a

play, think about the time and place, and for your writing. Once you've decided on when (TIME) and where (PLACE) you've got your characters (WHO) and your ordinary world, we can kick off the action with the inciting incident

back to the chairs. So the inciting incident, sometimes called the exciting incident, the call to adventure, the catalyst, it incites, it stirs up the ordinary world and sets the plot in motion.

Something surprising happens to your central character that unbalances their world and sets them on a different path than usual.

So the inciting incident is when the life of the character is changed. They're awakened to a new goal or a new desire within them. If the inciting incident didn't happen, the story wouldn't exist. The inciting incident provokes the question, what will happen? And then later on the climax will answer, 'this'. So where does the inciting incident usually happen? It's usually standardly within the first five to 10 or 15 minutes in your play. For example, in Macbeth, it's scene three, he encounters the witches who prophesy that he will become the King of Scotland.

The prophecy awakens his ambition, which drives the plot. But sometimes the thing which kicks off the story actually happens before the play starts. But in that case, there is normally another event, which kicks off things for the character within the play. Let's, let's look at Hamlet, right? So what kicks off the story of Hamlet?

Okay, so the inciting incident of the story of Hamlet could be when Hamlet's father is murdered, and that happens before the

play. In the play itself. You could say the inciting incident is when Horatio interrupts Hamlet's ordinary world, and tells him the ghost of your father has appeared on the battlements, because this is the thing, which actually unbalances Hamlet's world and sets Hamlet on his new path.

Right. So even though something might happen before the play that sets everything in motion, usually, we still do have an inciting incident that happens in the play to the character on stage. Whatever the case, something should happen in the opening scenes of your play that kicks off your character's journey.

Right. So second exercise of the day of this video, let's think of some plays you like, and see if you can figure out what the inciting incident is, and see if you can find it within the play. If you can, try and think of a play where the inciting incident happens before the play. And if you can do that, see if there is also an event that kicks off the action within the play.

Pause your video there, have a go, and then come back to us and we'll move on.

Great, how'd you get on? Good, good. Next up, what comes after the inciting incident?

The refusal of the call. So after the inciting incident, your protagonist has a choice to make? Do they stay and bury their head in the sand and continue living their old life? Or will they change and go on their new journey.

So at this point in the story, the refusal of the call or the refusal of the quest, there might be an element of doubt or debate, they may talk to a mentor character, or they might just think about it themselves, the protagonist may initially reject their call to adventure. Like for example, in Macbeth, he turns to Lady Macbeth.

We will proceed no further in this business:

He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought

Golden opinions from all sorts of people, Which would be

worn now in their newest gloss, not cast aside so soon.

Acting. Macbeth from Belfast. So this is Macbeth refusing his call to adventure, that is to kill the king.

Yeah, he doesn't want to do it. And the refusal can be extended out, or it can be a short moment or even a single line. The point is, if you have a refusal by showing hesitation from your character, we know it's more difficult for them to go on the journey.

Okay, so after the refusal of the quest, you are reaching act one climax. So this is the end of your first act, the end of your beginning. This is what some people call the choosal. So there's a choice being made here. This is a crisis that forces the protagonist to make a choice, a choice between the old and new self

yeah, here your protagonists should make their first big decision. They leave their old world behind for good and

embark on a journey into the unfamiliar to accomplish a specific goal that they desperately want.

So in The Matrix, it's when Morpheus offers Neo a choice. He says, You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.

Neo chooses to take the red pill, he enters the matrix and goes off on his journey.

In Macbeth, Macbeth decides to kill the King, after some encouragement from Lady Macbeth, and what does he say Mick? Here we go.

I am settled, and bend up

Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

Away, and mock the time with fairest show:

False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

Exhilarating. I don't think I'm gonna get any acting jobs off the back of this.

So we think it's important to think of the Act One climax as a choosal just because it rhymes with refusal, so it's easier to remember, so refusal and choosal. So it's a choosal rather than something that happens to the protagonist. In stories we like to, we like to see characters being active, making decisions rather than being buffeted about by the story

itself. Yeah. So in this final moment of Act One, the end of your beginning, your character chooses to cross the threshold into act two the extra ordinary world, the middle of your story, where they will confront the antagonist on their own internal flaws.

But we'll look at that in the next video. So, to recap,

let's go back to the flip chart, not the board.

Welcome back the flip chart! [Laughter] Right. Thanks very much for watching this video.

Here's the recap of what we have learned today.

Okay, so we talked today about Act One, and we started talking about ordinary world,

which is the normal world for your character, what they get up to, what they usually do,

and then something happens. And that's the inciting incident which kicks them off on their journey.

Then we have the refusal of the call, "I do not want to go on this journey."

And then we finish with the act one climax, "Hm, I guess I'll go on this journey", and that's sometimes called the choosal.

So refusal and the choosal before they cross the threshold into the next act, act two

That's what we're gonna be talking about in our next video, the middle of your play, act two. Hope you can join us there.

See you then. Thanks very much.