

**Transcription**
**Open Submissions Workshop #3: Your questions answered**

Audio file location: https://soundcloud.com/traverse-theatre/open-submissions-3-getting-started-with-frances-poet

Video (with closed captions): https://youtu.be/6dB\_ROpKyAs

[BEGIN AUDIO]

[laid back electronic beat]

Hello. Welcome to my home!

The Traverse Theatre have asked me to do a workshop for you and this is the first time I've done one in this environment rather than toddling off on the train to come and be in the room with all of you. So I miss seeing all of your faces but I hope you are seeing And hearing me clearly.

My name is Frances Poet and I have been writing since about 2011. I was on maternity leave with my son and that's when I started writing. Before that I'd worked for a decade in script development. I was a script reader, I was a literary manager, I moved up to Scotland and was literary manager at the National Theatre of Scotland, and I was lucky enough to work with some amazing playwrights and had ten years to learn about their process and lots of different processes.

How people approach an idea and how they developed an idea, so I learnt loads from that and so today I'm going to be talking quite a lot about my process, which is not something I normally do.

I normally like to come to workshops and bring plays, brilliant extracts of plays by writers I think are like Gods - I'm not worthy - and just share them with people and talk about them but the Traverse have asked me to focus on my writing today and I am reassuring myself with the thought that since it's online if it's terribly self-indulgent you can just turn the computer off. Whereas it would be quite rude or difficult in terms of etiquette to walk out of a workshop. So hopefully it won't be!

The Traverse asked me to write about getting started. And - yeah, it's hard isn't it? I'll be honest I find it really hard and it doesn't really get easier. In fact if anything I get a little bit superstitious about the act of starting the play. I'm not one of those writers who has an idea and goes oh ‘I'll just write a little scene of that’, next day write a bit more - not at all.

I have an idea and I live with it for ages and I am scared of that first moment that I will start typing, start trying to write it and I delay that moment as long as I can. I was thinking about it before doing this and where it comes from is a fear - a bit like a book that you start and then get distracted and don't finish. Those books on my guilt pile. I never really go back to them even if I was loving reading them. It's so hard to getting back into the headspace you were in when you were reading it and they lie abandoned.

I think that's something I get frightened of with plays I start and I'm not 100% ready to start, they’ll end up languishing in the bottom drawer. And before I start there's this magic quality to them. The potential of the idea that I’ve had not spoilt yet. So what I tend to do is a lot of thinking. A lot of research if it's an idea that needs a lot of research. And I do not write a word. And then when I am ready - almost like a boxer who’s been pumped up to sort of the highest level and gets into the boxing ring, when I'm at that point I'm just raring to write it. I write it as quickly as I can.

And over the last 5-years my sort of rhythm of that I've often been lucky enough to find an opportunity to go to beautiful Cove Park near Helensburgh snd hire a pod for a week. And so I turn up at Cove Park raring to write the idea and I write it as quickly as I can and it is possible to write that play in a week - sometimes less than that, sometimes two or three days - and can you write a play in that short time? Yeah because you've done months of thinking and then months if not years of rewriting after that.

I found I wanted to write the play itself very intensively. Steve Canny said something - I was lucky enough to be one of the 50 writers that were attached to the Traverse for their fiftieth year - and we got lots of workshops through that. Steve Canny came and he talked about writing, and that ‘real writing’ was when you were thinking and walking and thinking and planning and talking about it, that's the real writing. And when you’re sitting at the computer you’re just typing it out, it then the real writing kicks in again when you start rewriting and working out where it's working and where it's not.

And that I found that really helpful I think that's what I do when I go to Cove Park, I type it out and the real writing has come before and it'll come after.

So that's a particular way of doing things. It’s not a think that I particularly know a lot about the writer's do, but that's my way of doing it. But when I talk you might hear a few things which is a recurring theme which has been writing Cove Park. Thank you Cove Park!

So I write in that way for and have written and that way for most of the bigger projects I've done but when I was thinking about getting started I realise that even within that there were very different ways that I approach different plays and that's what I want to share with you today.

So I want to start by talking about Maggie May. Which hurts my heart a little bit when I hold it because it had three previews and it never had its press night because of COVID-19. So it's a sort of bittersweet thing for me, Maggie May.

So Maggie May was a play that I wrote for Leeds Playhouse and it actually never got to Leeds Playhouse which is the heartbreaking thing, and I very much hope that it will but it opened at the very lovely Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, in Essex. So Leeds Playhouse do some extraordinary work with people living with dementia and a lot of that work is led by this wonderful woman, Nicki Taylor, who is their theatre and dementia research associate. They wanted to do something about dementia. That could be enjoyed by people living with dementia. They have pioneered dementia-friendly performances at Leeds Playhouse. And that's what they wanted this to be, so

the project was - the brief was - to tell a more positive side of the dementia diagnosis. Which is quite a daunting brief because my dad had dementia and it wasn't a particularly positive experience and it did feel very daunting indeed. I started off. I went for a week, I met all these amazing people who are engaged with Leeds Playhouse and by the end of the week it wasn't so daunting because I saw amazing people contributing a huge amounts to that theatre and I realised that dementia diagnosis was absolutely a new chapter in life. But not the end that we all might have thought if we've not lived through it. Or if we've lived through it in a difficult way. Some people are living very well with that dementia diagnosis.

So I’ve done the research and met lots of amazing people and I was still - although I could see the truth and the honesty that I was being asked to explore I was still really daunted by the form that the play was going to have to take. Because this was a play that was to tick a lot of boxes, not in a tokenistic way but it had a lot that it -. It was an ambitious project, a lot of what it was trying to achieve; it was to be watched and enjoyed by people living with dementia, by their supporters and by any audience who wanted to come and see that story.

So I booked a week at Cove Park. I'd done lots of research and thinking. And it was about two weeks to go. And one of the things, I knew music was going to be an important and one of the things that workers in dementia care are very clear about is a kind of disappointment with people who deal with people living with dementia and sing wartime songs. They're talking to the wrong generation! I'd known that very clearly, so one of the first things that I’ve not done for another character before but I found gloriously useful for this one was to go, okay what age is my actual character? What music was she was listening to at a formative age? And I worked out that it was about 1971 and one of the songs that came out that year was Rod Stewart’s Maggie May. And there was something about that title about the song title that the sort of stuck with me and I actually I think it has been used for theatre shows in past and - I don't know whether it was, a Rod Stewart musical or something else - but for me what was quite important that there was something in the potential of the ‘May’. Maggie May. Maggie May do anything she wants. Maggie may live a great life. Maggie May for something about the potential And that for me that's the exciting.

So now I knew how old my character was which was slightly dictated by the brief because it was a celebrating age commission so the character has to be over 60. But I didn't want to be far over 60 because I wanted that sense of a life interrupted. So I knew her age and I knew her birth date and I knew want music she was listening to her late teens and early 20s and I knew that she was going to fall in love with her husband at that time and those things are going to be really important. I had an idea that they could sing songs to each other and that will be really lovely way to include music that was absolutely integral to their relationship and that's what I had. It was two weeks before I went to Cove and I was worried I didn't know how this was going to sort of come onto the page, and I sat down and I decided I just wanted to know If I could hear Maggie's voice. And funnily enough I’m from Yorkshire. I grew up in Yorkshire and but my playwriting career has all happened in Scotland so I’m used to writing plays in the Scottish register. But I've never written a woman in the Yorkshire dialect. So I was partly sort of conscious of that. But I sat down and I started writing and I am not someone who is a massive believer in the sort of JK Rowling Harry Potter mythology, that, you know, I think she was on a train and she just saw the boy vividly. I generally when it comes to playwriting I'm a believer in hard graft.

So my plays very much come for my head and my heart and a lot of hard work. But when I sit down to write Maggie's voice, she just was there and possibly that might have been having such a lot of people and maybe she was an amalgamation of all of these people I'd met but actually she's unlike any single person I met and she just felt herself. And she's very feisty, jokey, a tough, tough woman who uses humour to protect herself and is sort of irresistible and from the first moment I wrote that I knew it was going to be alright, and I went to go park and I blasted it and at Cove Park I was still terrified about this form question and it wasn't until I got to the end of the play that I went oh

Ok this is a thing I think I've achieved.

That form, it was a lot of work to do after that but I put the end of that first draft I felt like I sort of was delivering what I've been asked to deliver. So in the first development of the play - which was a reading as part of a festival - we had this amazing actress called Ethna Brown and she has been involved and played Maggie in every iteration of the production and to me is synonymous, is interchangeable with Maggie and she kindly has recorded a Maggie's first speech that you can get a sense of how she sounded. And that first speech is very true to the bit where I just found her voice:

[MAGGIE] 'I've sent message to brain. Chink of light through the curtains. Morning. Who am I today? Sudden snort from the lump lying next to me. My husband. He doesn't snore he snorts! There’s a sudden panic in burst through the nose that wake me from the deepest of sleeps. Not that I sleep much these days. I found him slumped in the bathroom. What's happened to you?

He looks up at me, all confused and says something that sounds like 'where's your domino?’ I don't know love but if it’s childhood games you're on about I reckon we should start by looking for your marbles. ‘Where is your domino?’ 'Your husband's had a blockage.’ 'Don't talk to me about his blockage I've been telling him for 40 years he should start his day with a bowl of All Bran.’ 'Not a blockage of the bowl Mrs Morris, the brain.’ I know about that and all he's had a blockage about using the washing machine our whole marriage.’ Your husband's had a stroke.’ 'I know love, what drugs have you given him to make him well again?’ 'Because you got all the medicine I've got.’ 'That bloke of mine doesn't half pick his moments’ 'Must've thought I was getting all the attention.'

The brilliant Ethna Brown, who did a much better job than I would have done if I had to read it to you!

So I'm hoping and now that a subheading will appear on the screen saying: ‘Starting with character’.

So I really did start with character for Maggie May and I think it's really useful place to start and I've never done it before but I think it was really useful that was a really lovely way in - what was this character listening to as they were coming of age?

And so a few things that I find useful that I hope you find useful could be to start you

Off, could be on a second draft, when you're thinking right I need to find a bit more meat to this character. So when are they born? What are the crucial, you know what are the crucial life events that will impact them at certain ages? What was life like at 9? What was life like at 17? What was their 20s?

So I have a list of questions that you can jot down and answer for your protagonist now. I think I might have stolen these - I think someone gave me them in a workshop years and years ago, so apologies whoever gave me these! I might have added some myself.

* So name - I think name is very important.
* Their age - and I think working out what their age means.
* What does their age mean, what have they lived through? It's one thing to say 56 - yes, so what does that mean in relation to your age? If you're 56 then you'll know what they lived through but if you're 20, what does 56 mean in terms of their historical context?
* Their relationship status.
* Their occupation.
* Where do they live?
* Where were they born?
* What's their relationship to their parents?
* Are they an introvert or an extrovert?
* What do they do for fun?
* What's their favourite thing to eat?
* Have they been in love?
* Who’s their best friend?
* What secrets do they keep and from who?
* What frightens them?
* What's their finest hour?
* What’s their worst moment?
* How far have they travelled?
* What's their most humiliating moment?
* What's the thing they’re most ashamed of?
* What’s their dream? And of course that is crucial for drama in terms of what a character wants short-term, mid term and long-term.
* What's their aspiration.
* What do they want? Yeah.
* What do they want now, in the near future and what do they want before they die?

So some of those might be useful and some might not and I think you've got to be quite flexible with them. You can sit and jot this down now, as soon as this is finished, you can sit and jot answers down for that, and some of them could just be off the top of your head and you’ll go, oh yes that's useful or this will have to change as you go along. You might find that thing of that their proudest moment might come out during the play, and that might be sort of a kind of take someone into their confidence and share that. And what you scribble down at the the beginning might turn out to be really important. Or you might find things that you're writing that scene needs tweaking or what you've written here When you'd first sketched it out it isn't half as resonant as it needs to be, but now that you’re writing it you have a sense of theme and how to really make that speech as resonant as possible.

So I think you have to be quite flexible with these choices you make but it's I think it’s really it's the work an actor does, and as a playwright you're having to do it for multiple characters - we’re sort of doing the job of the actor and that's why a workshop with actors is so brilliant, because actors are used to doing that and they will ask the questions. Where you go, oh damn I forgot about that I've been so busy working on that character that I forgot about that character!

So I think starting with character is a really strong way into writing your play idea.

Hello! Now I've done a little sneaky scene change for you to try and keep things interesting. I'm going to talk about my play Gut now, which is the first full-length play I wrote. It didn't make it to the stage first - Adam pipped it to the post - and last time I talked about starting with character

So if we can have a little subtitle now it will be ‘Starting with Theme’.

Because Gut wasn't written to brief, and the protagonists are very like me. They are my age, they are from my socioeconomic background, my level of education and at time I was writing, their pressing concern was my pressing concern which was raising young children. So I didn't have any of the work that I had to do with Maggie May. That character work, that placing them in the context of the age and the things they would have lived through and their voice and all of these things they were sort of my givens. It was a bit of a cheat. I was allowed to write characters who were me and my friends, who I knew intimately.

So Gut was an ideas play really, and the idea I wanted to explore the world and how we perceive the world. Whether we think strangers are predominantly good or predominantly dangerous and specifically in the context of parenting, and I wanted to explore the idea that could as parents in our effort to protect our children actually cause them more harm than the perceived danger strangers in our imagination. So I knew that was what it was exploring from the beginning. Maggie May I knew had quite a complicated brief - I didn't start really finding out what Maggie May was about until maybe the second of third draft, and it's about communication actually, Maggie May.

But Gut I knew from the beginning what this was about so I started it very definitely. It wasn't about finding voice. I didn't start the beginning - the first thing I wrote was The scene in which Maddie, the central protagonist, tells her husband that she has hurt her kid and she has done it out of a very profound and desperate belief that she is protecting him in doing so. And that's the first speech I wrote. I wrote it again Gut was a play I wrote at Cove Park. I had two young children and I think I had one afternoon a week to write it and that was not enough! And again I wanted to write the play but I was scared of starting when it will take me months to even be within sight of the end and I went to begging to National Theatre of Scotland and the literary manager there and said I need some time to write. It was the end of the financial year. They gave me some money to go to Cove park and I am ever grateful to them for it! So before I went to Cove Park I wrote that scene, that horrible speech in which she tells her husband what she’s done to their kid and just like with finding Maggie’s voice I was armed when I went to Cove Park and it sort of became a North Star. I knew what I was getting towards - my job then was to see how I could get her there

And all the way through the development of a lot of people talked about Maddie being

Someone that the play was about mental illness and it was never intended to be about mental illness. I always wanted Maddie to be an everywoman but for the grace of God, every parent’s desire to protect their kid could potentially take, if the Perfect Storm of events aligned, we could eventually get there.

I mean, just to clarify, when I say I was writing from experience I have never and would never do what she did - and she does get herself into a place of madness to do that - but I wanted that to be a parent I wanted to be a good parent and someone who got derailed by the events at play. So once I wrote that scene I went to Cove Park and it was about filling in the details towards that and the aftermath after that and that speech never changed all that much. The original speech and the speech in the play text and speech you would have seen if you'd seen it on stage - and I've been lucky enough for that play to be produced quite a few times, so I've seen it in Quebec and Guildhall in a beautiful student production there and I was able to adapt it for radio, so I've encountered a few times - and that speech hasn't really changed.

So that is just another approach if you're writing the play that's very ideas heavy you might want to and you have found a dramatic way to realise the central question of your play and you know it that is you might want to dive into that and it's a kind of join the dots it becomes a north Star to guide to you in the writing of it and that doesn't mean - I had to do a lot of rewriting with

Gut to make it right. Maddy because I knew I was hitting this I started her I knew she - it’s like I knew too much where she was going when I was writing it - so she was the Maddie and the first draft in those early scenes was the Maddie was already the Maddy she was going to come and do some brilliant dramaturgy from a lot of amazing people I was able to pull back on that. Let Rory her husband react bigger than her the first scene when they’re told that there are worries that Rory's mother has left a stranger take their kids to the toilet and that's the thing that derails them both but by realising and knowing where I was heading was dangerous on one level because it may be flag it too soon with Maddy but in the rewriting I was able to retune that and make it that Rory had a bigger reaction than Maddie initially so Maddie's trajectory could be more surprising and she could go on a bigger journey with it so yeah starting with theme.

Scene change!

I'm going to talk now about Adam and the subheading that will appear beautifully on your screen is… Starting with form.

So Adam was another play that was written to brief Cora Bissett asked me to come on board as writer. She had met the wonderful Adam Kashmiri. The irresistible Adam Kashmiri. When he talked about his life and she'd come up to him and said I'd love to turn this into a piece of theatre. And she’d had this idea that she wanted to include a global trans choir in this huge sort of moment in the play those were the things I had. I had Adams life and I knew there was this moment with the choir. And I met with Adam and he was as incredibly generous as he is and talked a lot snd I wrote lots of notes and recorded him. So like Gut but unlike Maggy May I had-, I didn’t need to do any character work. I had the character, I’d met him, he’d talked to me. I knew intimate details of his life. So there was no need to start with character work.

Unlike Gut I didn’t know what the question of what Adam as a project would be in some ways it was a play, a piece of theatre, that was a storytelling piece of work - it was to tell Adam’s story. Rather than to scrutinise or provoke debate, so also, this is the one of the three that I’m talking about that I didn’t write in Cove Park and that was because there was a huge ticking clock on writing Adam because Cora was pregnant and there was a development planned it was a National Theatre of Scotland project planned but there was a development planned in London at the National Theatre Studio. And that had to happen before Cora had her baby.

So there was this very firm deadline which wasn’t very far away. So I didn’t have the luxury of months and months of thinking about it then booking a Cove Park and all of that. So I just had to get the hell on with it. And - So where I started with this one was to just try and find -I didn’t know what the tone was - I didn’t know, I didn’t know the form - and it’s weird to think now of it being any differently, working any differently than it did. Which was two Adam’s, Adam Kashmiri and a cis-female actress playing sort of, an Egyptian Adam played by Neshla Caplan in the original production and Hannah MacDonald in the remount. Both glorious actresses and actually in this first draft it had never been discussed that Adam would be playing himself. So everything was different when I was writing it. But I actually was sort of resisting any sense of the binary. My initial idea was for there to be three Adam’s - multiple Adam’s! And one would be a kind of Glasgow Adam and bring that element. One would be an Egyptian Adam. There’d be another Adam that was sort of science, very steeped in science - that might’ve been the Glasgow Adam - and one that was really preoccupied with words and that was the Adam who played with this idea of the contranym which is a single word that aan have two opposite meanings and that became quite a big thing for the play. The development of this idea that Adam can’t remember the name of it

That it is possible to have a single manifestation but have these two opposing forces within you.

You know I read back my first draft before I did this and you can feel how I started I’m just, I’m letting the characters, these multiple Adam’s talk to each other and I’m starting to feel, to write my way into a form. And Adam changed a lot through the development process. A lot of brilliant input from amazing people, Douglas Maxwell being one of them, who I think is doing a seminar for you - he’s amazing. So, what I think is quite interesting about the way this happened, the way the play developed is that - I ended up writing for some of the body of this play, I would say is a memory play.

And the way I would define a memory play, my understanding of a memory play is, is a play which doesn't weigh, the characters are in a sort of place of status but through the reenactment and remembering of life events, they change through the course of the play. I’m not a huge fan of a memory play generally! I’ve read a lot, you know I was a literary manager for many years. I’ve read a lot of memory plays that leave you feeling sort of cold you know, why are we going over these memories? You know those, you know what happened to you - why do you, you know as a form it feels a bit boring to me. A bit slow, a bit meandering, a bit whimsical. And I don’t think Adam is fully that because there’s also this incredible coming of age story. Adam becomes a man and I think that the trans narrative is a gift to a dramatist because it’s the physical - you know, what we all want is for our characters to change dramatically over the course of a play and in the trans story that transformation is manifest physically as well as internally. Of course Adam always had that structure but I think there is this form in the centre which is a kind of a memory play form. Which I like to think is - you know - I think that the stakes are so high for Adam stuck in this room in Glasgow, going mad really trying to prove who he is. And he’s stuck physically, geographically but he’s stuck physically. But yes, so I think what’s quite interesting is I never would’ve set out to write a memory play.

I didn’t know the form. I didn’t know the question of the play. And the answers I found came through writing it. I wrote my way into finding some of the themes, some of the nuances, sense of antagonism between what became the two central Adam’s. And so I suppose, wanted to talk about that, in that context that you, there are lots of different ways that you might want to try to jump into writing to starting the thing!To starting the play. And it is totally valid, it’s not my usual way but it is totally valid to write your way through to finding what that thing is. And what I think is quite interesting about that is that you’ll probably amass a lot more material and as I did with Adam. Suddenly the job becomes a lot more that of a sculptor, you write your way into it, you find your things that are good and a lot of flab and then you’ve got a bigger job to do through the reading to sort of chisel away and find the gold shape at the heart of it.

But yes, that’s another way you can approach it So three different ways, hopefully one of them will chime with you and this might’ve whet your appetite to jump in. I wanted to just share with you a quote that I really like from Tennessee Williams who said; ‘I believe the way to write a good play is to convince yourself that it is easy to do then go ahead and do it with ease. Don’t maul, don't suffer, don't groan until the first draft is finished.’

And that really resonates for me. Playwriting is a privilege it is supposed to be fun and -if you're not-if you're boring yourself’. You’ll probably be boring us. So at this moment when you're poised to get started remember that be playful. You're writing a play be playful have fun with it enjoy where it takes you. There are lots of different approaches you can take. But enjoy it follow Tennessee Williams advice. And I think it's again interesting what he says about don't maul, don't suffer a groan until the first draught is finished. He's not implying that there won't be more morning, suffering and groaning further down the process - there will! There are undoubtedly will!

You deal with notes from every different corner. You try to make this play the best thing it can be throwing stuff away hoping you haven’t thrown the baby out with the bathwater. So there will be suffering but the first draft should be a joyous thing.

So have fun with it.

Yeah so that's your little pep talk on getting started.

[AUDIO ENDS]