

**Transcription**
**Open Submissions Workshop #4: Finding Inspiration & Rising to the Top of the Pile with Playwright, Douglas Maxwell**

Audio file location: https://soundcloud.com/traverse-theatre/open-submissions-workshop-4-finding-inspiration-with-douglas-maxwell

Video (with closed captions): https://youtu.be/svpyuEu3C2Y

DOUGLAS MAXWELL:

Hello everybody, I hope you're all healthy. And that your family are healthy. And you're happy and you keepin' the heid. And I hope that if you at all get the chance you're getting to the desk every now and then and trying to rate as write as much as you possibly can. My god it helps, just making up something that isn't true. What a tonic. I recommend it.

I've been asked by the Traverse Theatre to make these wee videos, to help you I think, just before you send your scripts in. I don't work for the Traverse - so it doesn't - it's not official. So don't think this is like the rule of thumb for the theatre or anything like that. It's just a personal reflection from me. Some of it may be helpful, some of it may not be. It's meant to be about inspiration of all things, which is a really difficult teaching point. I think you might be on own there! That idea of just a fizzy little, tickly idea when you think - oh! I could write a play here. This is a show. What I might be able to help with is what you do with it. And how you keep that burning and how you keep writing.

Um. Really though if I'm honest, what this is probably all gonna be about is the rather horrible business of sending plays in and then waiting on responses and dealing with all of that crap.

Which is where I came from really, I'm one of the very few playwrights I think certainly in Scotland and maybe even Britain who's journey to professional playwright was from the slush pile. Right at the bottom of the slush pile. I sent plays away for five almost six years, in brown envelopes to Literary departments all over the country. And had knock-back, after knock-back, after knock-back until eventually, I got a play on. So I can kinda talk about that a little bit. It's difficult. Because when I first - I think when I was working it out...my story when I first had plays on in about the year 2000 was that I'd come through this kind of rejection period. And I've been crying, you know it's like 'asshole gets lucky' or whatever the headline was but I think I said I'd written 20 plays - that was the number because it was nice and round. And I thought it sounded quite cool But the truth is, it was way more than that, it was way more than that. I was not just sending the plays off all over the place, I was writing for youth theatres and I wrote for Scottish Enterprise, I wrote for business conferences and there was loads of things that didn't send out. Lots of one-act play things all over the place. I wanted to keep the number down I thought that was a low number! But I felt quite insecure about just how much work I've done before I had my first play on because I was largely surrounded by my peers and my friends who had plays on at that time. It was their first show for most of them. For most of them it was the first or second thing they'd ever written and then that play went on all around the world. And for me I felt really insecure about that I felt really embarrassed that maybe these guys were naturals. You know they - they just had it in them, whereas as I was a hack but I had to like really work at it and graft away and fail, fail, fail, fail, fail.

You know so I felt really bad about it. I slightly lied about it a little bit. That period though is really important of that, maybe where you are. Which is writing plays, where you're sending them out and trying and trying to find something that's yours. It kinda made me who I am as a writer, really.

I think about it a lot. It's like a book that falls open at the same place I'll go back to that time a lot.

Particularly, I go back to - I was living in Mount Florida in Glasgow in a flat with my friend during that period and I slept in his kitchen and I slept there for like 6 years or something and it was your typical flat of that era you know, there was no central heating, there was no double glazing, there was no shower and there was no oven. Em - All that nonsense. I was writing the plays and I remember one point where I was going down to shops on Cathcart Road and a voice came in my head. Clearly. I remember it stopped me in my tracks and it said: ’You’re not a real playwright'.

'You're just pretending' and it just felt so true. Because I wasn't real playwright, right? I'm writing things that weren't going on. It doesn't make any sense to write a play that doesn't go on. And no-one was reading them nobody cared. And yet I was signing on and working these horrible crappy jobs churning these things out, why?

It felt true but now when I look back at that guy I think, I don't know if I’ve ever been more a real playwright than that time because what was keeping me going man? But what got me back to that desk to write some godforsaken farce set on the Titanic, or whatever the hell I was doing. What was keeping me going? It was because I was an artist. I didn't know it at the time. It was because I had to, I think and I don't really understand the drive of it. And much like the inspiration thing you might be on your own with that too, of finding a way to keep going but you do need to find a way. It felt really - that insecurity never quite left me, I’m not sure it's ever really left. But I'm proud of that time now and it certainly was my Gladwell's 10,000 hours you know. Of how I learned to do what I do. And hopefully I'll be able to explain some of it to you.

And I've also been on the other side of the fence because I've worked in literary departments

I've taught in universities and judged playwriting competitions so I've read a lot of unsolicited scripts. And I've seen it from the other side, it’s hard to give advice on that without it sounding ridiculously general but what I would say is overwhelmingly I don't have the numbers in front of me I think it's something like 82 percent of these scripts are trying to be Caryl Churchill. Okay, I don't know why that's happening. But that's what it is. Particularly, I think a lot of writers that come out of university programmes, which I've taught on a lot and on these are amazing programmes, amazing masters and degrees But somehow at the end of that it seems to be that there is only one type of play and it's the Caryl Churchill type of play. Wonderful though they are.

But it's a hard thing when you've going up against, let's face it the real kind of Churchill, never mind all the other people pretending to be Caryl Churchill.

But more important is the idea of what people tend not to do which is quite rare that somebody's trying to be funny and an unsolicited script in which is weird because comedy is really a desire in an audience they almost demand it. It's almost - it's almost a demand that there should be wit and humour in there somewhere for an audience. But it's hard, it's the hardest thing to do, so I can see why people don't do it and it can be judged and it's subjective and stuff. Whereas if you're being opaque and intelligent and deep, who knows whether that's good, it might be you know it's impossible to say. Whether that's you know - but comedy somebody can go in and say I don't like it

And the other thing that people are trying to do very very rarely is to move an audience emotionally. To make them cry. To make them feel something. And again, it's an absolute fundamental of theatrical writing. But again, I know why people aren't doing that because when that goes wrong [WHISTLES] the blood gets everywhere. It's a mess you know and people can feel embarrassed that they've tried to do that. It looks like you're being controlling. Or like yeah you're being a soap opera or something. However, nobody's doing it and it was one of the many breakthroughs for me.

I'm going to talk about the breakthroughs for me. One of the things is that I haven't stopped working like that, unsolicited. The way I still prefer to work professionally is if I come up with an idea, don't tell anyone and I'll work on it and work on it and work on it, here. And then I'll send it out into the world, so that the play does the work for me. It’s a difficult way, I'm not recommending that as a way to work really because you don't make any money! Working for nothing and you'll still being rejected and all that stuff, you don't really grow as a career from that way. What the upside of that is that the play itself has to do a lot of work before it gets goes on. By the time you've seen a play of mine that I've sent in like that it's convinced an awful lot of people who didn't ask for that in advance. It's already been tested and tested and tested by the time an audience get to see it, which is something I feel quite good about. I still like to come from that point of view. I get nervous when someone is going to take a play of mine no matter what it is, in fact I've only ever done that a couple of times. It's never really worked for me, I much prefer to have written it. Now, again as you can imagine, that means I'm wasting an awful lot of time because much of what I write doesn't work. I don't know what that number is, let's say one in three - probably more than that! Is the place I want them to be. I'll come back to that my notebooks and stuff in a wee minute. But I write down all my ideas - any idea I think when I get the tingle - when my spider-senses are going oooh! That's a full show. I mean that it'll hold an audience's attention and it will move them in some way. And that just unravelling the story is gonna take two hours, right? So that's a proper play. Anytime I get an idea like that I get a notebook and I write rough working title on it. And I put it in there. That means I can put it to the side and I can put ideas it it whenever I come back to and it can build up over time. Over the last let's say four years these are the plays that I've written that have come to nothing, so absolutely nothing. That I'll have written these and maybe I've given them to one person, some things I give them to a director and say, I think you'd be good for this. Hopefully match-making a bit. Sometimes I give it to everybody I send it out and what happens to me, rather than the rejection you guys will get which will be on email probably, I get total silence. Now what happens is nothing and it's another type of death I have to meet people we're just in a bar and we just pretended it didn't happen you know - even though I know that I've handed over, they're not mentioning it. You know just it's so embarrassing but not even mentioning it. Two ways the pain comes one is when you realize and you read it back and you go 'oh no it was rubbish!’ How could I let this out the house? I worked on it for three months - three months is what it takes for me for a draft really. Work three months on this and it's crap, it's obviously crap. What a neck! More painful is when you read it back and go, no it's not it's good! I think it's good! How could I be wrong how? How can I be wrong about this?And the thing is you kinda have to admit that you're in the wrong because those other

People are the audience, we don't write for ourselves we don't write for one person, we’re writing for an audience, so if people don't like it, it's the nature of the beast.

And some of these were, no, no good. This one, The Neutral this was the big neck for me because I thought this was the bee's knees, right? I gave this to everybody, all the artistic directors got this. And I handed it over as if I was giving them a wonderful Christmas present or something. ‘Sure you're quite welcome' Nothing. Complete silence on it. Oh, I was gutted. And some of them come to plays that don't they - they just die on the vine, maybe they don't work. And some of them, this didn't even get anywhere. Some of them become other plays, this became another thing, this became a character in another play. I don't think I got a draft on this. This one, The Coward, I worked for about a year on the script of The Coward and I was so excited about it but it became too big. It was a cast a seventeen which is impossible and things had changed where there was no way anyone was doing a play of mine with a cast of seventeen. You know it was no chance. The Citz responded to this one, Frances Poet was in that meeting and she got me a meeting with a TV company and a TV company have taken this on, who knows? But it's been a long long journey to happen. So the rejection never really goes away.

I see us as we are, what we are is like a tiny little cottage industry. Right? And we're producing these wee things and we put our stall out and we go to work, we bring these things out. When the rejection day comes the cottage industry is shut for that day, right? Nobody can work on that day nobody can. Your job is to make sure it's open the following day. However that you do that. For me, it's always 'wait until they see the next one’. You know, I always think like that's it I'm out. I'm never doing it again. I can't take this anymore. I've get my little blank bit of paper and I write; 'other jobs I am qualified to do'. And I go...hmm...hmm...hmm Nothing. But then another idea comes [inaudible]. This’ll work. This'll work. That one didn't work but this one will work. I'm excited about this one. And that gets me on it's -. The creative act of writing a play gets me on. And I go right through it again and then every now and then you write one that for reasons that are beyond me catch. And people want to do it, they're excited about it.

You want to be sure of your own work and we'll talk about how to do that a little bit but You don't want to be delusional about it either. If people come back and say it doesn't work, you've gotta listen to them, you’ll know instinctively if you're being fobbed off or if this person knows what they're talking about and it's giving you decent advice. And you have to listen to it, you really do. I'm not sure I did listen in those years, that's why it to me so long I was belligerent and ignorant, really. I didn't know how it worked.

I was looking this morning, I was gonna show you some of my rejection letters. Because in those days you got an actual letter, you got your script back in a stamped, addressed envelope. So you would see your own writing on the doormat and your day would be ruined. I can't find my rejection letters I used to give them out at workshops and things like that. Pile of them like this. A quite a few of them were quite nasty because I don’t think I was behaving very well! I think I was being a bit belligerent a bit chippy, a bit swaggery. And a bit kind of like: ‘Yous have got something against me and some conspiracy going on’ [mocking voice]. You know and I don't feel very good about that. There was changes happened to me with my writing and I'm going to talk about now but the personality thing, write this down - don't be a dick. Because God, that causes so much trouble! This is such an interpersonal little business ok and bad behaviour and being an asshole it just puts you back so, so long trust me, trust me. If it wasn't for the forgiveness of a few professionals, I wouldn't even have started I know their names and I'm still grateful to them who looked the other way on some you know ignorant behaviour when I was trying to get going and

I didn't have a clue how the industry worked. I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to be doing or why I was doing it.

So, what changed? What got me out of all those 30 plays? Slush piles into getting plays on and produced and having a career that's lasted 20 years? Basically, it was three things, I think, I changed how I wrote. How I literally put the play - laid out a play on the page. Okay, how I prepared for it and how it looked. I also changed who I wrote for. The audience, who they were in my mind. And then I changed who and what I wrote about. Okay?

In amongst all of that was the big one which was not a conscious decision, which is, why I am I doing this? Why? What's the point, because I didn't know. I'm not - I wasn't ever taken to theatre as a kid or anything like that. I didn't see a play and think 'I want to do that.’ I was doing it, I just liked being in shows I like being in the school musicals. Was in them as a student, I had my own little theater company. I liked acting, I liked directing, I just liked the big daft laugh of it. I liked the nerves, I liked going onstage I liked the whole journey. I didn't know why I liked it or what point it had or how it tied in with my life or anything it was just something I thought, 'Oh God if I can make a living on that, how great would that be?’ It was something I came to later, I understood why I was in this job and what I got from it.

So let's split it up. First of all let's talk about first of all the changes to the look on the page. There's been two periods of my life where I've watched the movie 'Withnail and I' on a daily basis. The first was when I was a student and I was pretending to live that kinda bohemian life and all that. And then the second period was when I was living in Glasgow. I'd moved here to try and become a playwright and I was literally living that 'Withnail and I' life in that flat, drinking every day, trying and failing and trying and failing. I watched that movie in that period like a documentary really. I clung to it. But it was important just as a piece of art for me. But more important was what happened when I read the script, which my friend got hold of the script somehow. I’d never read a screenplay before I don't think. I've still hardly ever read any screenplays. It's not a thing I do. But the opening of 'Withnail and I' changed absolutely everything for me because if you've ever read it, the first, I don't know what they call them in movies, but in my life it'd be a stage direction, describing the flat as the camera pulls out the kitchen and how the music's playing and how these people look, is a page and a half of the most incredible writing. It's ornate, it's hilarious, it's bizarre it's - it’s got a voice it's like Bruce Robinson the writers voice mixed with Withnal. Rather than this text being something functional, which when I was coming through the nineties that was the era of stage directions just being - A field. A busted hotel room. Something like that you know it was a bit uncool people thought stage directors were for George Bernard Shaw, you know? This stuff painted the picture so well mot just about what we could see but what we could feel and what kind of thing we were going to get. It is spoken the voice not of the writer but of the show, of the film, in this case.

It struck me that these plays that I was sending off were being read by not the artistic director, or not the director of anyone who would ever do the show but by people quite low down in the ladder. Maybe they were associates or they were Literary managers or whatever it would be at the time I can't open up the phrase but people were saying things like ‘I read it on the bus and I found it quite difficult to get into.’ It's like God, man they're reading them on the bus? I'm gonna have to do it - and by taking my script as a kind of guide I thought, right. I'm gonna do that I'm gonna write stage directions at the beginning of my play that you cannot put down that welcome the reader into the world of the show, that describe - but also that speak in the style of the play. They'll be more ornately written, maybe then people are used to but it will mean that you will be turning the pages. That when the characters come they are fully described, they're embedded in the world, I also sure that I started putting jokes in the stage directions. Wit. That showed that I hadn't just turned this out, this was something I was spending a lot time on especially right at the top, those early stage directions. There are no rules to writing a play. No matter how often people like me talk about these things and doing my workshops and my lectures and all that, you can do what you want. But there's no right way and wrong way to do it. But there are rules to this play. The play you're working on at the minute will have certain guidelines. You'll be able to do things in this play that maybe you couldn't do in another play. What was right for that will be wrong for this. E.g. in this play people can talk to the audience. In that other play they can’t. In this play it's going to be lots of little scenes spread over 10 years. And this other play it's people in a room, okay? And that breaks down into tiny little rules, where words the way you phonetically spell things it doesn't fit this play but it does fit that play. In that opening stage direction those opening minutes what you're doing is laying out the rules. You're not saying, it's literally you're just letting the reader,

In this case, the woman on the bus, you're letting her go 'in this play these things can happen’. This is the world of the play we're doing. Don't betray those rules.

Now halfway through a play, you may go and see something or you might read something and go, 'oh my god that's so much cooler than mine', you know? I wish I was doing a play like that maybe I'll change it. Don't. You've got to tell the story of your play you've got to listen to the play and you can't betray it. You know, the trick is to express that play's voice in the most eloquent way possible. Don't get in the road just do what the play is telling you to do. Follow it. I'm trying to listen really carefully to what it's saying is allowed in this play or the way to tell me is to do this, all comes in the beginning. I know that opening bit is the part of the play you are gonna come back to again and again. As things developers, as you write the play, that take-off, will need to change, you know and you rewrite and rewrite and you'll read it and read it and read it one thing you need to consider I think, that I didn't in those days was your plays are being read on Kindle most theatres are paperless so - I hate them. Because Kindles bugger up your fonts and they bugger up your tabs which is dead important. No matter what anybody says and it really just annoys me. Have a look at your play on a Kindle, and in the same way I was looking at my play as it was to be read on a bus. How many flips of the page do we get before something good happens? You know, is it smudged? Is it too tight looking? Is the font okay? Check that all out, make it readable, do them a favour. Welcome them in. Because really what happens when we get to the business end and we do it for real which is with an audience that's what we're doing, we're welcoming the audience into the play. We're saying this is what's going to happen This is the world we're in. This is what we're dealing with. This is how I'm telling you the story. And there always has to be an open door for everybody. There has to be an open door, they have to be able to get in, even if it's the most crazy, avantguard thing they have to be able to get in somehow. Or else, what are we doing?

The other thing that I changed at that point was I moved my premise much close to page one. Now, that was a very deliberate act because I thought people aren't hanging around to find out what the story is. They want to know much quicker than they would normally do in a play. In a play actually you can wait a little while for your premise to arrive. Pople like getting to know who these people are, where we are, they like looking at the set, they like watching actors do their thing, they like finding out the characters and then they like to find - oh here's the premise! On the scripts I was sending in those days though, that wasn't working though because nobody was reading

Beyond page 12, so I had to move it much earlier. Don't panic I know you're all thinking - Douglas I don't think I've even got a premise. You do, you do. The premise is what makes you want to write the play. It's the thing, the idea for the show. It’s the bit that you've thought 'oh I'm going to tell people that’. What's your play about? Oh it's about this guy - You know, that's it. Now to be literal about it, your premise is the part of that sentence of explanation where you use the word but. Okay? This character, or a set of characters they are in this situation and they have certain expectations. But something happens that has never happened before and - boom - into to their lives. Okay that's the premise that's the beginning in the premise. Actually in a story the word 'but' is married to the word ‘so'. Okay. But this happens so they decide to...So this guy turns out that he's the - So somebody doesn't - You know it's the action. But is the problem. So is the action. Okay? And you'll have that already that’s what the idea is, that's what your play is, so don't worry about that. I moved that much closer to the beginning of the page. Now the trouble with doing that is, it becomes a much harder form of writing. New plays generally speaking and in a lot of my plays they have one premise. And then that 'but', that bomb goes off and the expectations of this world, the thing that's different, that opens people up. It creates a conflict between people. The past gets revealed, people need to express new things because of this and the characters interact because of it. And then at the end, 'so they decide to' or 'one of them decides to' the action comes right to the end of a new play. And that's the play. And there's nothing wrong with that. But by moving your premise right to the beginning means you're going to need more but's and so's. But, so, but, so, they try that doesn't work so they try this but that means that because they can't, so we then have to do this and that becomes our narrative, which is a very different type of play. And actually not that common. Theatre isn't really narrative-driven anymore. TV is and films are but theatre doesn't really there are other things that can keep it going. But all we're really keeping an eye on with this stuff once it's up and running: are we holding the audience's attention? And are we moving them as we tell this story? A theatre audience wants to be in a different place at the end of that 90 minutes than they were at the beginning. How do they get moved, that's up to you. It can be anything you can cheer them up, you can anger of them, you can radicalise them you could make them feel sad. Give me a feeling love you can terrorise them. But of those two the holding of the audience's attention is far, far more important. Every note you're ever gonna get from this stage to rehearsal room, when people come on 'I don't know about this', 'does that work?', 'is that confusing?’. Really what they're saying is I don't think they're gonna listen. I think we're going to lose them. That's what this problem is it's not working. When theatre doesn't work it just means the audience aren't paying attention. And although it sounds low and it sounds a little bit unimportant, if there's no attention there's literally no art. Nothing is happening. Theatre is not, sometimes I think it's actually not literature, it doesn't exist on its own, the script. We're creating instructions for events and the hope that that event then causes some kind of artistic reaction, with the audience. So we're hoping that within the holding of that attention something's going to happen and something's going to move them, but that's really all we're trying to do with that. So by moving the premise meant that I had a lot more work to do before I got going.

So rather than what used to happen which is just I had an idea and started. But just having an idea was enough then it didn't have to be a good idea. It could just be even a conversation on between two people I just start. I very often paint myself into a corner. Or it was just like a sketch had been stretched out over two hours. Knowing that I had to have more of these 'but so' 'but so' 'but's so's' meant not had to go and prepare. And you know that's where the books came in. I would have to write this out, I'd have to work out who the characters were, where they went and how does it go? But that allowed me to see the play as a much bigger, whole, so I could start placing in repetition. I can start saying 'oh that was a cool moment’. Maybe, later on, I'll reverse it and someone else does one that's a little bit similar but different. Or maybe that phrase pops up again that we've heard before. But someone else heard it and now they're saying it but it's a misuse or…[inaudible]. It starts to become more of an intricate thing, I started to have to break it up because you can't just have that kind of frenetic plot happening. So I started putting things in two halves, first of all then I started chopping things into three which is really the most satisfying for me. Three big chucks of stuff.

I wasn't really thinking about acts in those days. Nowadays when I write, I go further and I write a full synopsis of a play. This is for a play I'm writing at the minute, for students and this is an 18-page synopsis of the story, of every moment, every beat, before I start writing. So I've done the work. Then I do a structure, then I do a synopsis. Because it just keeps that - I feel like it's the richest way to do it and it allows me, where I am now with my writing, I'm looking for that depth and richness. But listen apart from all of that, there is another thing which is sometimes I don't do that. Sometimes an idea just comes to me and I want to start, I want to feel the wind in the sails of it. And I know I can do it. The idea presents itself in such a way that it's already there. And I just have to keep it down. Sometimes that's a kind of coming together of two or three of these failed ideas. Come crashing together, the style of how it's done and tells me that it's exciting. And there's no doubt about it, that type of writing is much more fun - you feel more like an artist then you do when you do when you're planning and doing them. Those are tough days when you're writing synopsis. Tough days when you're planning it. It's a grind sometimes. It doesn't feel like you're been very cool. But it gets you where you need to go. Sometimes they come, some times they don’t. It doesn't happen very much for me this lightning bolt thing but they are my favourite pieces of work. So you know I mean, no rules.

Next thing let's talk about…The other big change that happened to me, which was changing who the hell these plays were actually for. In the middle of all that in 'Withnail and I' period I wrote a play called Decky Does a Bronco. I wrote 15 plays after Decky Does a Bronco though that were completely rubbish. I'd even forgotten, I barely knew I'd written it. I wrote it for my cousin, Colin. We'd been out for a few paints one night and then we've got talking about a summer we'd spent as wee boys, giving broncos on swings. And I thought I'd write him it as a present. I never gave it to him as a present but it was a very different writing experience from what I was writing at the time

It felt I could feel something here (heart). Rather than there (head). I could feel it. I didn't mean to guess anymore about what those people were saying. And at the end, when I wrote the ending of it I burst into tears and I remember being completely ashamed of that and thinking I was doing something wrong, that wasn't what happened when you were reading about Pinter and all those big boys you know in the good old days, they weren't doing that. I thought I've made a terrible error with it. That there was something wrong with this. I mean, I really was a fucking idiot! I mean I had no idea about anything I was so dumb I wouldn't even have watched something like this. I was really dancing in the dark. But really that was the change, it took me a long time to realise that

What I'd done with Decky Does A Bronco was an important thing and it tied that was that, was that a couple of ideas, one was I was writing it for my friend. I was writing it for friends, you know. No longer was I thinking of the theatre audience as being retired judges, and old ladies with blue hair who I didn't know. And I no idea what they people would expect. I wasn't writing for people who knew a lot about theatre and were saying oh that's wrong you shouldn't be doing that. A plays that this, a play is that. This is what a play should be. I was writing that for people who probably didn't really want a play. But it was freeing. Now when you're thinking about who's that's play for, there is a direct answer to that. You're writing plays for your friends, okay? Not for me, not for the audience, not for mythical audience anyway. Not for the various kind of people we have to impress.

The audience for your plays is your pals, you're trying to impress them. They know what you know, you don't have to explain the references. They also know when you're bullshitting. You know but they want fiction, they want something made up. But they also want recognisable things they're gonna get it, okay? You talk to them without artifice. You talk to them without putting on a voice

You're direct, you don't hector them you don't lecture them. You're not trying to convert them, you're just talking to them. You can argue with them. That's a different thing. You can't be boring you know which is surely the key to playwriting - just don't be boring, try not to be boring. Write that down. They know you. Decky got sent away with all the usual rejections and then it got pecked to go to thing via Tag Theatre Company, a place called the Performing Arts Lab which was about writing for teenagers. Now again, being the idiot I was I didn't want to go because I really looked down my nose at that. I thought I thought it was like plays about bullying for school gyms

'I'm not doing that I'm Tennessee fuckin' Williams’. You know the usual rubbish! But thank god I did go. Because it turned out for me the last little ingredient that changed my work forever was to aim it at a young audience, younger than me. So I'd be a bit more 24 roundabout this point and I was being asked to think of the audience being 250, 15-year-olds. Now unlike when I was picturing in the play when I was writing it and I do, when I write my plays I picture them on a stage.

I know some playwrights don't, they picture it in the real world. They can look, if it's in a cafe they can look around and see all the bits cutter - doesn't work for me that. I picture people up there underneath a sign that says 'cafe' with exits and entrances. I see it from our point of view, everybody's different. But when I thought of the audience I thought of a lot of old people like professors, people who knew what they were talking about and you know critics and art experts and it shut me down for reasons unexplained when I saw them as an audience of 15 year olds I knew exactly what to do for them. And I knew how it would work I knew how I'd change things to get them to work for them. I knew what they didn't want, you know? And I knew how to tell them a story in a theatrical style. That would be relevant to them but would also be kind of cool and surprising and kinda funky. That was a big change and I still now do a little skim read of a play of mine before the send it out, picturing it from the eyes of a 15-year-old who's never been to theatre before and has all the prejudice that they have. Will it work? And it is always something that brings a play of mine to life. I can't write for them anymore, I've lost that over the years. Weirdly considering now I've got two daughters, one of them is 12 and you would think I'd be more attuned to that. I haven't. I've lost the voice. It's gone. But it's still there as an idea as a reader, of seeing it as an audience member. Down at that performing arts lab, I wrote the first page of a play called Helmet, which is about computer games and the computer game shop I was working in at the time. It was a page and a half and I just kept reading it and reading it and reading it when I wrote it because I knew it was different - I knew - I knew that it had turned out that there hadn't been a conspiracy. I just wasn't very good. I just wasn't good enough because here in front of me was a play.

Okay, now this ties into to my next thing which is what you're writing about. When I was sending those plays out, I wrote whatever came into my head. As soon as I had an idea I wrote it down and I just started. And I was copying all the time. Copying other writers, my favourite playwrights, plays I'd seen. I don't think there's anything particularly wrong with that, I’m not sure that there's ever been someone has done it another way, I think all artists start with some degree of emulation. And it's how we learn in a sense and how we learn what's different between our voice and someone else’s and I thought I knew what plays should be about. I think some people quite often do that, you naturally think a play should contain certain types of scenes and types of people and maybe be a type. People quite often people think a play should be people trapped in a room, you know?There's a million other ways to tell a story. But I thought there was types of situations, types of people and I was sure that the last thing anyone wanted to be interested in was anything to do with me. I hadn't left a very interesting life I didn't have a very unusual perspective or anything like that, I didn't think. So I didn't really give my own life much of a thought until really late on him after people started liking Decky Does a Bronco and Helmet, those kinda plays I was writing at that point. I started to write plays set in my own world with my own guys in them, my friends, my people, my family, people I saw, people I worked with, people I spoke to. And that changed absolutely everything for me. I was no longer doing a version of something. I wasn't trying to emulate someone else, I was being myself. At first I thought I was making a terrible mistake because I was being not - naturally that those places seemed a lot smaller than these big epics, these were these were massive main stage dramas and tragedies about Kings or Queens, or soldiers, or people guns or any of that. They weren't diatribes, they weren't lectures as they weren't testimonies of awful things that had happened to someone. They weren't news, they weren't politics. They were just these small little things, tender things but they were mine they belong to me. That was who I was. That kind of changed everything for me. It was a turning round of the lens, instead of trying to notate what I saw the world as being, I pointed it back at me and how I felt about seeing the world coming from the inside out, it was a slightly different way of looking at it for me. Those locations, those charactes, street names, jobs, jokes, music or the whole thing became a fabric. It became a kinda world that I could easily get into. I no longer had to guess what people were gonna do. 'Oh what will we do next I wonder?’. I don't know what a Prime Minister's gonna do I don't know what a King does but I can picture what someone in my life is going to do under a dramatic situation and that dramatic situation, that premise we talked about earlier one was fictional. I made it up I dropped a fictional thing into the real world. I also, keeping an eye on those 15-year-olds up the back, had I gave a kind of theatrical otherness, just a frame, a moment just to break the realism I'm not a fan of reality. I don’t like it very much I much prefer something else, I like it to be real. I’m still saying these people are real, believe in them as real

But something other happening around it just to keep it surprising and keep them - keep the audience a little bit dazzled snd keeping the theatrics going with it. I put my own dilemmas in, so rather than the problems of the world it was things that I was worried about, just choices I had to make, things that were were bugging me or worrying me. My conflicts rather than the conflicts of society, just things that I was in two minds about or unsure about or worried about. Very often it was a there 'but for the grace of God go I 'story but had I not done this, this might have happened

And the more I've done this I do this, I do actually think this is our job as playwrights, it's our duty to take the people from our lives, our guys, our families, our friends, our world as we see it and to put them on stage and to demand through our talent as storytellers that the audiences pay attention to them with the same respect they give Shakespeare's kings and queens. Our people are just as important as that. These stories are just as important and they're worth your attention and you'll get something from it and we'll get something from it. We've got to find ways to make our stories as alert as that and as vital to the audience.

I've used the word voice I'm clocking it a wee bit because I don't like it, I don't like the word voice about plays because what really happened with me was, I didn't find the voice, you don't find voice. You've got a voice. You're born with a voice. What I'd found was a song to sing that suited the voice I already had. I couldn't hit the notes that Tarantino, Mammat and Pinter and Ayckbourn we hitting. I couldn't do it. You know. I couldn't hit Brecht, I can't do Shakespeare, Chekov or any of that. My voice doesn't suit it. Brought closer to the ground I wasn’t singing or singing acoustic ditties around a campfire, you know. It suits my voice. It suits it. And the voice of the play started to mesh up with my own voice to make this eloquent storytelling style which is what you're really hoping for in the end. The weird thing that happened at that point, this was way before I had a play on I'd written 3 plays that eventually went on, it took him two years to go on. What happened was I changed because I was making these things, making these plays that were mine. No one could copy them it'd be impossible. They weren't really like anything else either, I’d crafted them and shaped and worked on them. And they were better and they held attention when you read them. They welcomed you in. They were whole organic pieces that were one thing that were mine.

Strangely what happened is I stopped being a dick. I stopped swaggering around with a chip on my shoulder thinking was a conspiracy. Stopped kinda thinking I was the big 'I am’. And just relaxed because I felt I'd done it. And I felt if this doesn't come to anything I'll be alright because I have made these things.

Also what happened was I didn't need to go and do any salesmen stuff. I didn't need to brag. I didn't need to make promises I didn't know if I could keep. The play did it. I posted it off Decky Does a Bronco, Helmet, [inaudible]. They did it. Someone people liked it, some people didn't like it.

But the play opened the doors, the play told the story. The play was its own thing. And the more I've written strangely, I've found I've gone off the rails when I betray the plays when I'm not the type of person -. I’m not living up to the plays. The plays are better than me. I should be really, I should be honouring them in how I behave and how I talk and how I write and how I go about my professional business. I went a wee bit off the rails again once my plays went on I got liked moored and all my dreams came true. I went and a bit into the dark side there again. But I got back to being who I really am by going back to the unsolicited script. I had a play on in my second year as a playwright that was like such a phenomenal disaster, that nobody could work with me now I was box-office poison. I'd made a few enemies by being a fanny and not being a nice guy and thinking I was ace even though and I think it was just all those years reading NME, I thought I was how you're meant to behave. No! It's not that like! It's a village, you know. We're all in it together. And I had to, my hand was forced I had to start unsolicited scripts again. I started writing plays without putting my name on them. I wrote a play called 'It Destroyed True' that you have to read 14 pages before you get to the title page because I knew if they saw my name and a title they wouldn't read it. But there was no way I had to reinvent. Go right back to the beginning again and go back to where you guys which is sending plays away. It's always been the rejuvenator factor for me. To come right back to that point of 'somebody has to read without knowing who wrote it’. And it still has to rock. It still has to rock. I'm still in competition with you guy, I know you won't buy that, you know, but I feel it. I feel I know how to compete with you, my play has to go toe to toe with your idea. Because the new in new writing is always better than the old, we’re not very good at that, especially in Scotland but we're not very good at creating that canon of work and creating a professional ladder that people can survive on. You know, you get a point where you're out the door floating off on a bit of ice. It's happened to me, I'm three times round now - out of fashion, into fashion, out of fashion, into fashion. Don’t know what to do and at the minute, of course, I'm a white, straight, middle-aged, middle class man. You know nobody wants to hear from me! At all! So my plays have to be super good they’d have to be unbelievably exciting on page one, right the through just to go toe to toe with you guys. I love it, though I love this idea that your work is the work I'm interested in. You're the type of plays I go and see I love new plays. I love reading them. And I love talking with you guys and I love that - beginnings and I'll always want my place to be in a tussle with them

Even if people are saying 'I fucking hate his writing, they're terrible those bloody plays and all the same’ I like that little argument. I like to be part of it. You know, I'm looking at that work and thinking, right what do I have to do here. To lift my work up to everyone else’s. It's the same thing you're feeling, I'm sure I now. But as long as you've created something that's yours, from your own work, the pain goes away a bit. And things begin to be a little easier and you start to open up.

When I was sending these plays to the Traverse, really the Traverse Theatre was my only open door for years and years and years the woman that was reading them was called Ella Wildridge. I'm sure she was pulling her hair our with me! Because she could sense in me, that there was something about me she could sense I was probably a theatre person, I was an artist but I just wasn't doing it right. And I used to drive her crazy! And stuff I was writing - I went through a whole period of writing like frat-boy comedies. I think 'comedies' I was trying to be like Kevin Smith or something but they were real. People were disgusted by them. Misogynistic, really ignorant and horrible and I mean this was the nineties! How bad must they have been! I write one thing then radically change the other and I was all over the shop. Anyway, one day Ella said - I said I've had four plays or something, when's my next one coming on? And she said it'll be your fourteenth play.

And it destroyed me that it would take long. Strangely though, it was fine because as long as I had a new idea - you've always got have something on the horizon just to keep you interested, something to look forward to but she also introduced me to her partner who was Tom McGrath. Who is a really famous figure in Scottish theatre, an amazing writer and amazing person

You know this little office in the Lyceum bill and I went along to meet him and he did that kind of introduction speech to me he was talking away and he said the phrase 'See Douglas, writers like us' - I don't know what he said after that. I blacked out. Right. I was like, us? What's he talking about? There was nothing that tied me to Tom McGrath nothing at that point and yet he used the word, us. And there was something unbelievably empowering about it. No one had even referred to me as a writer I felt like I was a pretend writer or s developing something or another, you know a workshop playwright wannabe or something. No one had just said, that is, you are a playwright. You're doing it. You're writing plays, therefore, you are a playwright. It felt incredibly important to me. But the work us is the key and it's really vital that you see it in two ways, one is I started writing for us. Not them. I wasn't right in plays that had to beat them. Or get through the door or through that the gate or whatever it is they weren't getting played to an audience of them. I was writing a play for us. I assumed we were an us. That we were all in this, at the same together.

That we run we would all buy into the story because we've all felt this and we all want to see it because we all love these characters and we've all been these characters because I have been these characters and that the audience were us and they went we didn't need to be convinced they didn't need to be beaten down or explained to, or talked down to. They were us, they got it, you know?

And that's actually the truth and when I was reading all the books beforehand about those big West End playwrights and New York playwrights their audience to them are strangers. I’m very much - you know very much an opposite different. Completely different class, completely different lifestyle. Had kinda descended to see their plays and anoint them, that's not what it’s like if you're not working playwright in Scotland, it's just not what it's like. You know the audience you see them, our plays go on in smaller theatres. There's a proximity to the audience both in life experience and just a fact they're there. They tell you what they think the whole time you know what you have a relationship with them and I've been so blessed and lucky in my career that

I've had a relationship that's lasted twenty years with an audience but I’ve had a conversation that has developed as I've written characters are moving from maybe from their teens to their twenties to thirties, now into their forties and I can develop that conversation together. The other thing was that I started to think of the theatre industry as us which before had that then I very much wanted to be on the outside, I wanted to be, I liked that. There's something nice about that. To feel that you're outside and they're all together. They don't understand and they're ignoring you deliberately and it's all a conspiracy and that bitterness can be quite it's quite a nice feeling, it's something to cling to. For me, as a playwright bitterness doesn't work as an engine for creativity, it does for some people, for quite a lot of playwrights I think they get something from it. It's a little spark. It energizes them. It just doesn't work for me. And it doesn't work for my characters. So by starting to think that actually no, they're not a conspiracy but desperately trying to do a good work they're all artists and all they're trying to do is find great work for the audience. They’re pushing you towards the great work and in a way I slightly leaned into it like I wouldn't have watched this, I didn't go to workshops, I didn't go and hear playwrights speak. I didn't read any Scottish playwrights until dates until I'd had plays on then I I was forced and understood that I was part of our much longer line. I thought I was some unique genius and then I started reading all these playwrights and went 'on God, they've all done this before me' and are much better I need to up my game here you know. And that changed things it changed the view point I became a slightly better person apart from anything which again helped my work, I think. Not to say that that ambition that you may feel is abad thing ambition is good and that drive for success and fame and fortune and that urge to keep going helps with theatre we have to be on the front foot, we're more performative our plays like I said won’t get whispered into the ear of one reader. They are shouted in a room of strangers it takes a lot of courage and it takes it’s a public forum it's very difficult you have to learn ways to do that as a split personality thing you have a nice poetic soul over here and then you have the person that steps out and becomes public we have to find a way to do that. So that ambition gets you there in a way. It gets you over that threshold of terror and fear that you're not that type of person. You are you are but you just have to fake it nobody actually likes it but if I had to say something for my perspective I can only talk from my perspective.

To you, that I can say you will absolutely definitely make it as a professional playwright because I did and I swear to God my stuff was so much worse than yours! It was so bad, it was so bad. And I made it! I've been writing plays for 20 years I've had plays on all over the world, I make a living. I've only ever really written for theatre as well I don't really write for anything else him so it's doable my god is doable and if you just follow that keep playing plays, keep reading plays, keep reading books about plays, seeing plays when we can and then keep writing a lot I think you'll get there

One last thing before I go let's do some quick fixes, ok quick fixes for if your play has hit the skids

Here's what you can do that may just bring them back to life a tiny bit.

Okay couple of any quick things you can do if you feel your play is struggling a little bit. All plays sag in the middle, every single one there is no exception to that, even three minutes plays have a little sag in them. The way to get round it is a distraction you’re looking for breaking out of scenes before they kick off, splitting things up. Have your interval about 55 minutes. Roundabout an hour an audience does this. [SIGHS] Right, they kinda reset a bit. You can feel them. They're not out forever but they just wobble a wee bit at about an hour, so get out before the hour. Split it up so it rattles along or have a distraction of some sort. More problems are better than fewer problems if there's something gone wrong it probably because there’s not enough - your characters don't have enough to kick against. There's not enough problems happening which means there's nothing happening at all. Playwright Iain Heggie gave me one of the best bits of advice I've ever had he said

'That in every play, at every moment something has to be happening.’ You might think 'oh course something has to be happening, it's a play, what else could we do?’ You'd be amazed, I think about that advice on a daily basis. I'm reading a scene going 'what the hell's wrong with this?’ Oh. Nothing's going on. It's just people talking. Talking isn't enough. Language isn't enough. Something has to be happening underneath. Plan it out. That's your other one. It's boring, it takes ages but it works. Split it into bits. Two halves. Saturday night, Sunday morning. Beginning, middle, end. Three days, three acts, three stories. There's three people, there's three whatever it is. Split it into bits. It helps you compartmentalise. Doing all that prep allows you to put repetition and details that make it that hark back to the beginning of the play which makes the play seemed unbelievably muscular.

It just looks like there' somebody driving this thing which people love. You can have a good play that is wobbling all over the place and people get a bit nervous they're not sure you meant it. So it just shows look like - look like you mean it. Or fake it - [INAUDIBLE]. Read it out loud now when I write I read it out speaking in a sort of voice. I've had to change my desk around my window is over here and my desk now is here. I had to get blinds put in because this is a house I've been in flats all my entire life I've never had a house before but this is a house with a neighbour straight across and they were see like this [flailing] 'How dare you say that to me.' 'Who the fuck are you to say that...'

I act it all out but in a kinda whisper voice and you I when I'm finished my draft I read the whole thing out not only for timing but for breath and to get a feel of this the shape of it. But you don't really learn until you get someone else to read it out. I started getting friends to come round, I'd get a big box of wine and my pals would read it and some of them were trained actors. They’d been to Langside College but some of them were just ma pals. And it's torture. Because even though they'll have killed your scripts stone dead with a terrible, terrible acting they'll have no problem whatsoever in telling you that your structure is wrong or dramaturgically it's not very strong or exciting. And we've done this before me. You know they're telling your rubbish, basically. But you will learn so much from hearing those words in the room, it’s really worth the pain. Stick a character than your play that doesn't say very much. You'll thank me. Work out what state your main characters are in at the start of the play. What's state of mind are they in? How do they feel? And then you flip it, right? Complete opposites. Then you flip it again. Complete opposites and then you flip that one more time. One. Two. Three. It's a slalom of emotions for them. By doing that you can work out what your story need to do to push them into that emotional state. The emotion of the character and the story work hand in hand. They talk to each other, they shift around. It's kinda hard to tell but chances are you probably haven't given them enough bends.

Just give them more to do. Take a risk. If you're ever weighing up 'oh, this is a bit risky', always go with the risky one. Theatre awards risk. It rewards courage. So the scary thing.

Don't worry about theatre.I know at the moment you might start to think that this whole thing is even more pointless than it used to be because maybe there won’t even be theatre at the end of all this. Theatre will be fine. Theatre's survived the death of the classical world, it survived the plague, it survived the Puritans. It survived Celebrity Big Brother. It's fine. It'll make it. Maybe in a different form. We might have to adapt we might have to start changing how we write or who we write for. Where it's gonna go. But it'll still be there and it needs you. It needs you to write the plays. Because only you will know how to do that. I will be gone by then I won't be able to do it.

Or I'll be desperately trying and failing to catch up wth you guys. But you know how to do it.

And I can't wait to see what you come up with. I can't wait to see what those answers are. I can't wait to be in a theatre again I'm so starving for it. And if I'm starving for it, everyone's going to be starving for it. Starving for all types of theatre, particularly that scuzzy, fringy, slightly pretentious, stuck in a room kinda theatre. Where, yeah you know maybe performance art kinda stuff that doesn't make any sense. I'm so hungry for that and I'm hungry for comedy and I'm hungry for a deep, dark tragedy. And I'm hungry for those one person shows that are just like misery operas.

Everything. But I want to see particularly what's new, what's the new thing. That's going to come and save us all because it will be there and it'll be coming from you guys. I can't wait to see it and I hope that was of some use. I hope it wasn't too torturous. If you ever see me hanging around in theatres come up and say hello. I want to know you and I want to find out how you're getting on. And you know, writers like us, we've got one thing that we have over others maybe, which is that we know why we're doing this - to come from where you are, to where having a show on

To come where I come from. We know why we do it and why we keep on doing it- because we must.

Because we have to do, it or else we just don't function as human beings and keep on keeping on. And I hope you stay healthy and happy. Look after yourself. I'll see you on the other side.

[AUDIO ENDS]