

**Transcription**
**Open Submissions Workshop #5: Open Submissions 2019 Alumni Interviews**

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Video (with closed captions): https://youtu.be/HxTQz7LAdcg

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ELEANOR WHITE:

Hello again, I'm Eleanor the Literary Associate at the Traverse Theatre. I hope you're enjoying the series so far.

In this week's open submissions workshop, I'll be speaking to Eva Edo, Rachael O’Connor, Natalie McGrath, Hugo Timbrell and David Finnigan. The five playwrights that were selected through last year's Open Submissions window.

If you don't know by now, every year the Traverse is introduced to new and exciting voices through our Open Submissions initiative. We then collaborate with some of those writers to develop their scripts and to begin an artistic partnership with them. They receive script development, 1-1 dramaturgy sessions and the chance to showcase their work to our audiences.

Today I'll be talking to the brilliant writers we found through last year's window, about their writing habits the plays they developed through their attachment to the Traverse, and the writers that influence and inform their work.

I hope you enjoy the session and that we'll see you next week for Hannah Lavery's workshop on form. It's a good one. So stay tuned.

**What’s your name and where are you speaking to us from?**

THE WRITERS:

My name is Eva Edo and I'm speaking from my home in London.

I'm Natalie McGrath and I'm in the attic in my house in Exeter.

So I'm Hugo Timbrell and I'm a writer based in London.

Hello, my name's Rachel O'Connor I'm speaking to you from Edinburgh.

Hi, I'm David Finnigan I'm speaking to you from London.

**How did you start out as a writer?**

DAVID FINNIGAN:

So I'm a playwright from Canberra in Australia originally, and I began as a kind of independent theatremaker in that Canberra indie theatre community. Canberra is the capital of Australia and it's quite a small town. It's about 300,000 people and it had a pretty small community of independent theatremakers. So I started out as part of this, I guess generation of people who made work. We didn't really go to see much work, there wasn't a lot of work to see. There wasn't a lot of touring theatre that came through Canberra. So the only stuff we saw was what our friends and colleagues have made and the only inspiration really we got was from each other. So that's the kind of community that I emerged out of, ,aking plays with my friends, for my friends and in a little kind of weird ecology that was very disconnected from the world around it.

The only way that any of my scripts ever got produced was if I produced them. So I was producing plays and writing them and you know, directing and acting and doing all the things that you do as a devised maker. It was a good many years of doing that before any script of mine kind of made it out of my circles to being produced by people who I didn't know and who I wasn't already kind of working with.

EVA EDO:

I started out at around 2013. I was involved in a community project run by the Royal Court Theatre in Peckham. It was called Peckham Soap Opera and it was a live-streamed performance of a soap opera in Peckham and I was a performer at the time. And the Royal Court immersed everyone in the project and we got to do some writing and that kind of struck a chord with me and from that time onwards I said, I'm going to write a play. Which I went off and did over a couple of years.

RACHEL O'CONNOR:

I'm really lucky because I run my own business so even though it is all-consuming, I can timetable things how I want them to be, mostly! So there's a cafe around the corner from where I live and on the days when I've got free time, I'll go there take my laptop, take my headphones and sometimes it's really quiet. Sometimes it's really busy, but it's all locals and I'll just sit and I put my headphones on listen to Radio Head. But the good thing is you can look up, so you can look up and see people around you. But if you want to I'll take the headphones off and then you can immerse yourself in the writing as well. So it's - I love doing that.

HUGO TIMBRELL:

I currently work part-time at a school. So I work 30 hours a week at the school. Which affords me sort of 10 hours of writing time a week, if I'm lucky. [LAUGHS] And if I'm disciplined! And I try and write in sort of four-hour stints. So - umm. Sort of two hours, a little bit of a break. And another two hours, that seems to be the way I write.

EVA EDO:
I write from home in this room which is quite nice because it's got a little balcony and it's quite high up so I can just see the rooftops. So it's just a nice, shiny, open sunny space. I write - try and write most days. I don't actually succeed. I try to write something even if it's five or ten minutes.

DAVID FINNIGAN:
The truth is I often write in bursts. Umm. In the ideal world, in the development context the dream for me is that you're in rehearsals in the morning or in the evening and so you're in rehearsals for half the day testing out material and hearing it on the floor and seeing actors try out lines and scenes and then when that's finished you go home. And you take your notes and you just write and rewrite and rewrite and you come back the next day with new draft and repeat. That’s, I think, when I'm at my best. That kind of constant dialogue between making and writing and then seeing the work tested. But that isn't always possible and it's not possible when I'm writing solo work for myself. It's not possible in the kind of context I'm in where I don't have a kind of company that I work with regularly. I'm from Australia. I'm here in the UK now. And there just isn't a group that I work with in that way, that I would maybe back home. So the last year or two it's been much more pen and paper work. I'll draft with pen and paper and then I'll type it up and there's a kind of editing process that happens in the typing so there's sort of two modes going on there. First of all, pen and paper because I'm - the Internet has sort of destroyed my focus and my capacity and really rewired my brain for the worst. So I'm much better at producing just purely with pen and paper with headphones in in a cafe and then editing I can type up and edit it on the page, on a computer. That's a very slow process and editing suddenly my weak spot. I can generate a lot of material very quickly, that's something I don't have a problem with. But writing anything good is very difficult.

EVA EDO:
I think probably going to see Misty by Arinze Kene a couple of years ago at the Bush. It was just really quite overwhelming because the audience really participated. They were whooping, they were cheering, they were standing up, they were shouting amen to that! For me, it was really engaging. And to see so many younger audience members engage as well. So that was quite um, yeah quite pivotal.

DAVID FINNIGAN:

I saw a production of No Exit the Jean-Paul Sartre play, When I was 17 at the at the local theatre,

It actually happened that - so myself and a couple of my best friends we were in year 12 at the time, and we had done a little weekend theater workshop and we'd met an older person who was in her early 20s called Bob Barnett and she was a director and she was directing a show and we went along to see this theatre show. That was by someone we knew sort of and it was the most mind-blowing thing because it was on a stage. It was is a tiny venue - like a 40 seat of space, called Gorman house that was absolutely tiny, bare minimum, but...It felt like the real thing and it was by someone that we knew and she'd talked to us about how she was making this play and then we got to see this play and the penny dropped that you could actually just make shows, you could make theatre. So it was amazing like we loved the play and we went straight away - we went out and sat up all night and tried to write our own script. That we then tried to get put on. But for me, that was the probably the - yeah, like the real turning point. It was realising that there wasn't actually any barrier to making your own work, anyone could do it if you could just find yourself a room and some friends, just to stand up and read a script out loud.

**Tell me a little bit about the play you developed through the Traverse Open Submissions?**

EVA EDO:
I developed Tiger Mum, which is a solo show one-woman show Which I initially wrote on Soho Writers Lab. The Traverse kindly picked it up in their Open Submission And it's about a black mother's journey to ensure that her son survives. The tagline was - or is, 'He's not sick. He's black.’

HUGO TIMBRELL:
Motherland. Was the play I developed through Open Submissions. I think motherland is a high concept, other-world sort of alternate-reality thriller. But I think hopefully, particularly through the development process. The play is turned into a thriller and it definitely leans on the thriller genre.

NATALIE MCGRATH:
Blessed is a play that moves between two worlds; s war zone in the 21st century in a basement where a war photographer, Alex. Is trying to understand the death of her colleague Fran, whilst also trying to keep a medic, Louisa alive whilst the sky is full, Is being lit up by bombardment. And what happens is probably due to the shock of the situation, the extremity of the situation, the PTSD, Alex keeps moot things jar for her. And she moves between that world and back into her home life, in Scotland. And a series of conversations - the last conversations that she ever had with her mother. Who was dying and has passed away. So it takes that kind of emotional imaginative leap out of this very dire situation, into a past kind of past moment.

DAVID FINNIGAN:

Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson in How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days or it’s Katherine Heigl and James Marsden in 27 Dresses or it's Drew Barrymore and that other guy in Never Been Kissed. Or is there actually as you and I was saying the other day Eleanor, it's Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams in The Notebook. So it's glossy, colourful trash. It's about two people who meet each other they don't like each other, but there may be a spark between them and they're forced by circumstances that are fairly arbitrary to have 44 different kinds of sex over the course of the week and in doing so they discover that they may have feelings for one another.

RACHAEL O'CONNOR:

It's about an elderly couple who are lost and they lost physically, emotionally and they've lost their connection to each other. They've gone into and what they think is the Modern Art Gallery. But actually, I'm hoping the audience isn't quite sure where they are. They're just in a big old building and it's about them trying to reconnect with each other and their lives and

I think it's quite funny, but I'm hoping it's also quite thought-provoking.

**What was the development process like?**

NATALIE MCGRATH:

Those two development days kind of transformed the play entirely. I would say.

HUGO TIMBRELL:

It moved the play to a place that was so beyond just being in my head - me typing at a laptop or at my desk or whatever. And I think it just really elevated the play by having other people's opinions and views about it. It basically it felt like you weren't a solo writer. It felt like you had a whole team behind you that were interested and invested in the play. And that's a huge amount of support.

DAVID FINNIGAN:

The actors, the director and dramaturg all had lots of questions. Some of which were questions that I could answer, a lot of which were questions that I couldn't answer. And they were also - they were probably the most useful. So I learned a lot about where there were gaps in the play gaps in what I knew about the play. What I knew about the characters and also I learned a lot about how people understood and read the material. And I kind of went in there with my assumption about like this is what the play is and this is how people will read it and this is where the problems are and of course, I was completely wrong on all fronts! And I walked away with a huge list of notes of things that I needed to fix. And things I needed to reflect on further and possible areas that I could research or experiment more with. So it was a really lovely two days and the whole crew that were part of it were just really switched on and sophisticated. Everyone was so script literate. The speed at which we went from first reading to really detailed in-depth conversations about characters and themes was just incredible. So it was quite a special two days. I was really I was quite exhilarated leaving Edinburgh afterwards.

**What was the most valuable part of the process for you?**

EVA EDO:

The most valuable part from me of the development process with the Traverse was I definitely would say the two days looking at the script. For me personally, notes aren't an easy thing for me to be given that experience really taught me that they need to be given, they're necessary and what to take from it. Yeah, it worked really well for me and it allowed me to redraft and improve the play.

RACHEL O'CONNOR:

I actually think the sort of validation, for me, was the most important, so it was receiving the first email saying your plays being selected. Because I think up to that point I wasn't - you know your sort writing in a vacuum? You don't know if what you're doing is any good, or if anyone's ever gonna want to read it. I mean it was all - it's all been of amazing value. But for me, that was the most important, I think.

NATALIE MCGRATH:

I think it's always such a gift for writers to never underestimate the gift of being in a room with actors a director and a dramaturg who are paying very close attention to what you've put on the page and it in a way that you know, I think actually - the most valuable part was having the holding space from the Traverse Theatre and knowing that there was a very understood developmental process. That began with the dramaturgical support with you, and then moved into those development days and then moves through to further dramaturgical conversations. And then into being amidst an audience and hearing some of the work and snd that knowing as a writer that you have a scaffold to support the development of that play probably is the most important and invaluable part of the overall process.

HUGO TIMBRELL:

I think that gives you a sense of confidence in your work, in yourself as writer and in that piece.

But at the end of day, I was incredibly nerve-racking as well so - [LAUGHS]

RACHAEL O'CONNOR:

It was wonderful to hear the audience laugh at the right places snd be silent in the right places and it was a very positive experience.

EVA EDO:

Sharing the extract and Tiger mom at First Stages was [LAUGHING] nerve-racking hugely enjoyable and rewarding.

DAVID FINNIGAN:

Effectively, the only thing that matters is seeing whether the play works on the floor in the rehearsal room and in front of an audience. There's only - that's the only context in which the play lives or dies really so everything that you do as a playwright is in anticipation of that test. And all of the other writing that you do on the page is really just you trying to anticipate what will happen when you put it in front of audience.

**How much has the play changed since submitting?**

EVA EDO:

We pulled it apart, put it back together. We staged it. And it was really well received by the audience. Which is always a good thing.

DAVID FINNIGAN:

As a playwright, I feel like the play script is not the art. The playscript is like a blueprint or a map and you give that blueprint to a group of artists. Artists like a director and designer and actors and then they create the art from that blueprint. But the blueprint is not what the audience sees. Like, it's not like a book where - like if you're a novelist you are effectively kind of writing a letter to a reader and you as the novelist are almost in direct communication with the reader uou know mediated by an editor perhaps. But with a play, the audience never see your script and they never shouldn't see your script if things are going right so the only thing your script needs to do is provoke that group of artists to make the best possible play and if it does that then it works and if it doesn't do that, then it doesn't work. So the question I'm always sort of sitting with is - is the script useful for that group of creatives? Which was really satisfying watching the creatives at the Traverse because they're very good. And so that both means that that you can get away with some things like, you know there's weaknesses in that script that they covered over for me because they're great. There were lines that were not very good that the actors just managed to make work by sheer charisma and which I shouldn't have got away with that I did. But then there's also beautiful things where they can real - if something is working they can really take it and run with it

and you really see when the script is working when a group of actors and director all kind of land on the same idea at the same moment and just go with it and it's not something that you expected as a writer but it clearly is the right thing and it just is it's so exciting seeing that!

NATALIE MCGRATH:

Blessed has changed in immeasurably thanks to the Open Submissions process. In a way the microscopic dramaturgy that was offered to me for this was, you know, one of the biggest gifts of the whole process because it really challenged what I thought the play was and where it could go and what it could be. And the language and the rhythms of the play and and - without sounding too sentimental - to hear it with Scottish voices, with characters who are Scottish and to do that at the Traverse in Scotland was you know, it was pretty special for me as a writer and I think the play has moved on in terms of - I think it feels like it - I don't know how to describe it in terms of a play. Even though you can kind of see it, it can feel quite rigid and you think it's got all the elements and all components, but they really need to be rigorously interrogated and enhanced and developed, but I think qhen it starts to feel like something that has -. That’s fluid and that can move, then it feels like it's getting close to potentially being in a rehearsal room. And I think that's the difference. It wasn't in that place at the beginning. And I think at the end of it, it's it speaks much more to that place.

**Do you ever struggle with creative block? If so, how do you get over it?**

HUGO TIMBRELL:

How I wrote through that creative block, I often revert back to this idea of writing as an act of empathy or the process of empathy. Leaning on empathy as a sort of tool for writing. And just sort of asking myself questions, about how it would feel to be a person doing this, or doing that or thinking about other people's internal struggles, other people's internal worlds and then secondly I also - to break through the creative block think about what I would like to see on stage? Like what am I going to pay money for and pay the price of a ticket to go and see? What will excite me? And if it excites you and if you have anything - any idea that excites you, I think you should just run with it. Because you're an audience member as well, And if it interests you then it's probably going to interest other people.

RACHAEL O'CONNOR:

There have been times in between plays when I thought, oh my god Am I ever going to write another one? Will I ever have another idea? But then it's just trusting in yourself and the sort of dreaming process and that -. Yeah, I think those times when I thought I don't think I'll ever have another idea, I've just I've gone to my cafe snd I've sat there and just written anything, even if it's like a list. I do a thing every morning, I write - I have what's called the morning pages. I write three sides and it doesn't matter what it is, it can be a shopping list or just blah, but I think it just helps get things moving and knowing that no one's ever going to read it. So it doesn't matter, uou don't have to be Chekov straightaway, or you could probably can't be! So I think it's, yeah, just keep writing, writing anything.

NATALIE MCGRATH:

I have different approaches to when the writing process becomes a struggle, you either have to think - you really have to kind of understand why there's a block. And so that means, often I think taking time away from the play so you don't over saturate yourself with it. And in other occasions, you have to kind of -. If that process is biting you have to bite it back and and wrestle with it, so and I think it's always dependent on what the project is but I always think a period of silence and meditative kind of time away from something that it feels like it has impossible barriers is always really healthy and really useful for me so. And to think about it, maybe listen to music that might be related to the play, or read, you know reinvigorate something, so I'm reignited and then see what happens. But ultimately you've got to learn how to be kind to yourself as well in these processes.

**Is there a particular play or writer that’s inspired your work?**

HUGO TIMBRELL:

I would say that it's Dance Nation by Claire Baron, who's a playwright based in New York, but it's inherently about people and teenagers and women and girls being competitive and I think that sort of really just struck me as something I’d never seen a play properly explore before. And it was really exciting as a play it was incredibly theatrical, it was about dance. And I love plays that have used sort of all elements of performance to build the story. And it just had a really good plot and really amazing examples of world-building, theatricality and vision.

NATALIE MCGRATH:

I'm going to be greedy and say there are two plays that I wish I'd written and they're Angels in America Parts one and two and by Tony Kushner. And I was thinking about this and thinking about there are many writers that I’m influenced by as well, but with Angels in America it's a play that sings in so many directions and it has -. Take such leaps of the imagination moving from one world to another from imaginative realms, to realms of struggle and pain and difficulty. And then will take us into absolutely utter poetic moments of beauty out of pain and struggle and difficulty and it just it just strikes me in terms of its ambition as something that is is just so extraordinary in terms of in reading it and in seeing it at the theatre. And I yeah, the way it's able to bring worlds different worlds together theatrically and it's ambition that just appeals to me so much as a playwright.

**What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever been given?**

RACHAEL O'CONNOR:

She said; 'I think you're probably much better at this than you think you are’ and again, that's to do with giving confidence because we're all so critical of ourselves in so many ways, aren't we? And I think there's just this thing of trusting in that - you have something to say even if it's tiny, it's still valid. And thinking, I don't know, other people might value what I have to write, hopefully!

HUGO TIMBRELL:

We are all many many many more things than one feeling or one moment. I think that really sort of encompasses for me, the process of writing or the process of being an audience member, or what stories are.

EVA EDO:

To write for my heart, rather than my head. So that's quite personal advice because I tended to write with my kind of pre-writers head on before. But now I just purely write from my heart and I think if you do write from your heart you can never be derailed because this could the story, the idea, the characters are really truthful. So that's why I do - write from your heart.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

DAVID FINNIGAN:

I was due to put on a show called Break Into the Aquarium which was going to be premiered at Future Fest in London on - sometime in March but just yesterday I caught up with the designer who delivered over the set that she has made and it's incredible so I'm now really excited about diving back in and doing some version of it for an online presentation. So it's a piece about the future of ecology and it's about what Britain might look like in 50, 60, 70 years through the prism of basically a group of people gathering together to break into an aquarium, specifically the London Sea Life Aquarium and stealing the fish and that is the jumping off point for us, for how the future of the UK's ecology is shaped. So it was a chance to kind of explore some of the really interesting movements that are happening in the world of Biology, ecology and rewilding at this point and where those trajectories might take us in the future.

EVA EDO:

I'm writing a piece called A Mother's Courage and I've just been really fortunate to get funding from the Royal Society of Literature. And that is a verbatim inspired piece where I'm working with mothers and mothers whose sons have experienced youth violent crime. And I am giving those mothers a voice and allowing their truth to be told, so it's a really exciting project because I get to work with the mothers. I get to workshop with them as well. I get to devise the piece and I get to show it at the end. So, yeah, it's brilliant.

[AUDIO ENDS]