

**Transcription**  
**Open Submissions Workshop #6: Telling It Your Own Way with Hannah Lavery**

Audio file location: https://soundcloud.com/traverse-theatre/open-submissions-workshop-6-telling-it-your-own-way-with-hannah-lavery?in=traverse-theatre/sets/open-submissions-workshops

Video (with closed captions): https://youtu.be/HLZlYOKM7AA

[AUDIO BEGINS]

Hello my name is Hannah Lavery. I hope that you are well. I've been asked today to share with you some of the ways that I approach writing for the stage. I'm going to give you lots of opportunities today to write and I hope that you're up for that!

I started out I suppose in poetry and spoken word snd I am still between that place and the place of writing plays. Although in many ways I don't see a distinction and I think as such my playwriting is rooted, or comes from the same place that my poetry does and what that place is I don't know but I do know ways to get there.

So I thought today I would give you two exercises that are really important to me, or have been really important to me in writing, my spoken word show The Drift and my play The Lament for Sheku Bayoh.

When I begin to write a play or a short story or a poem I often find an image or moment, not a starting point but a central, essential image that I move around and return to begin and end with and for The Drift and for The Lament for Sheku Bayoh I found those moments in photographs.

The Drift was an autobiographical show as many spoken word shows are and it was at its heart, about the relationship with my father and my grief at losing him quite suddenly. And I had this photograph of the two of us and when I was a baby and it was this kind of beautiful moment captured and I speak directly to that photograph at the end of the play. But it's also the beginning of the story.

With the Lament for Sheku Bayoh, I was to write a lament for a man I did not know, for a man I could not know and could only know through what was reported after his death and through the images. And photographs that were given by his family to the media there was one photograph of Sheku Bayoh in a kilt with - surrounded by friends and for me this photograph allowed me to speak about his humanity, about him as a father and as a brother and a friend and a son and a brother. And it helped me challenge the stereotypes snd the smears that he suffered in his death and after. And I returned to that photograph quite explicitly three times in the play. And the following exercise gave me those moments and I'm going to do it with you now.

Okay, so we are gonna do the first part of the first exercise and this exercise is called The Photograph. I must acknowledge here the writer and friend Shelley Day Sclater who did this exercise with me, oh, a version of this exercise 10 years ago and I have been adapting it and working with it ever since. So thank you to Shelley Day Sclater! So what I want you to do is, I want you to imagine, remember a photograph if you would like, if you were in the heat of writing a character you may well want to imagine the photograph as your character but this photograph doesn't necessarily need to be significant but it has to be a photograph that you know well and it would help if there was a person or people in it.

So what I want you to do is, I'm going to give you about five minutes and in those five minutes I want you to describe this photograph in as much detail as you can as if you are having to tell me about this photograph but it's a photograph I will never see. So I'm going to give you five minutes of writing time. Now.

**[TAKE 5 MINUTES TO WRITE]**

Okay so if we were in the room together this would be the point where I would ask you to share what you have written and then I would share what I wrote in those five minutes. But since you are not in the room with me I will have to share this with you alone and hopefully you will be kind because I have used exactly the same amount of time to write as you have to write.

So here is my description of my photograph. Okay. She sits on a rock in a blue swimsuit, white edging with yellow duck in the centre. She is about six. It is the summer though it seems overcast.

She holds a sandwich, hands covered in sand, knees all bumps. Her hair is in this glossy ponytail, big thick fringe. There are people around her but she seems only focused on the camera. On the back of the photograph it is written Wales, 1984.

Okay. So now we're going to move on to the second part of the exercise and for this I want you to imagine five minutes before this photograph was taken. You may follow the character back five minutes, you may stay in the place for five minutes. You may be the person taking the photograph. But if you can use, I. If you didn't use first person in what you just wrote there. Okay. So I'm gonna give you another five minutes to do that, starting now.

**[TAKE 5 MINUTES TO WRITE]**

Okay, so I will share with you what I wrote in those five minutes and I feel like I'd love to know, I'm curious what you are writing down too - bit okay so this is five minutes before the photograph was taken. If I can read my own writing!

Dropping the sandwich, the clouds move across the blue sky. Mum brushes my hair, hold it up into.

Pulls it up into a high pony. Places me on a rock, checks for the perfect view. This is 1984 there is only so many photos on the film. She is now on 21 last second as she is crouching down in photographer pose. My hand reaches out for the sandwich, Mum takes the snap before I have taken a bite.

Okay, yeah bit scrappy but we're getting there um. Probably what I should say in these moments as if we were in a workshop together, I would tell you that these first bits of writing are like new babies. So we are not too critical and we allow them to sit. And we do know that there is work to be done to bring them up to standard. That probably tells you too much about my mothering technique there.

And so what we're gonna do now is we are going to move back a bit further. So we were five minutes and now we are five days before this photograph was taken. And this is when you make decisions about who you are gonna follow back five days. Maybe you allow those people to leave the picture. And you remain in that place and you imagine that five days before these people come into it maybe you go back with one of the people, maybe you go back with the person that took the photograph. So I'm gonna give you five minutes to write five days before this photograph was taken.

**[TAKE 5 MINUTES TO WRITE]**

Right, brilliant, okay. So I will share again. So this is five days before that photograph was taken.

We are penned in the one-bedroom flat in Tollcross. You sleep in the lounge behind the sofa on a mattress, on a wooden frame. I make tea in the galley kitchen with red saloon doors. I turned the black-and-white telly on fix and adjust with a coat hanger. I drink my tea with you. My free legs swing dangerously near your sleeping head and I face to look at the cartoons. You drink your tea. The case is open for a trip to Wales. You have bought new clothes and batteries for the ghetto blaster. Which I will hold on my lap for the 8 hours it will take us to get there. And we will listen to show tunes to keep us going.

Ok so we're now moving on to the next part of the exercise, where instead of going back we are going forward and I'd like you now to go back to that moment of that photograph being taken and I want you to move five minutes before - sorry after that photograph was taken. Ok I think you know what we're doing now! So five minutes after the photograph was taken. And I'll give you five minutes again to do that writing. Starting now.

**[TAKE 5 MINUTES TO WRITE]**

Okay, I hope you're still with me! So this is my five minutes after the photograph was taken.

I am running full pelt to the sea. You have promised we will jump the waves. The sea is far out.

The sand hard to run on until it is wet. And then we speed up. You overtake me, spin round, run backwards. I'm speeding up now, I'm speeding up the sea, when we meet it is ice cold. And we jump over each break screaming with the gulls. The sky is vast and blue the beach is wide and nearly empty. Apart from the gathering of socialists we have come with. But free from the politics for a bit. We swim as much as we dare. Tomorrow we will stand with the miners. Today we jump, and we jump and we jump.

Okay, now I want you to move even further forward. Now if we heard forever to do this exercise together, we would keep going up and up and up. But let's go 15 years into the future or if you like you may want to go 50 years, or 5 years or 500 or 5,000 - this is up to you. So we'll go 15 years into the future from when this photograph was taken. Again you decide, who you're going to follow. Or maybe you stay in that place 15 years after those people were there. Okay, start writing. You have another 5 minutes, starting now.

**[TAKE 5 MINUTES TO WRITE]**

Okay so here we are 15 years after. Now, if I can meet my writing...okay.

Summer 1999. It's Prince on the radio. They countdown to the bug and I am waiting for you to be done with the landline so I can dial-up. There is essays to write and a new boyfriend to email. You gave up socialism. Ditched your idealism for pragmatism. That's a word? And you look good on it. Today we are in your garden, you are bungalow settled now. And we look at the forest print photograph album. Remember our beach in Wales? How we sang song show tunes and the red flag? Ate sandy sandwiches with the Socialists. Their chat is incomprehensible as our singing was unbearable. Unlistenable?

Hmm, can't see that last word there okay, right. There we go so, I have lots of little scraps here. Not gonna pass judgment on my own writing here but not brilliant. Anyway, I have little scraps if I was going to move forward with this I would probably find little moments within those scraps. Find moments that maybe a full scene - perhaps that beach - um or that feels like the beginning of a longer moment. The looking back those so. You can and also - if nothing else it would help me understand my character better. So I as I said find this an incredibly useful exercise and I return to it again and again. Both when I'm writing poems, when I'm writing shows, when I write plays, when I write short stories. And I hope that you found something in there for you even if it was just a line or two. Or an idea that suddenly presented itself to you. Okay so that was The Photograph.

If I told you a story of a heartbreak. I would not tell you that story from the moment I met my lover, I would tell you about it from the moment my heart was broken. I may eventually tell you how we met. I may tell you about the days since they left. But I would return and return and return to that moment of heartbreak. It is what pushes the story for me. It is what interests me and I find it is important to find that emotion that drives the story and I find it useful to track it and to check in on it and to see how it is. And when I wrote The Lament for Sheku Bayoh it was - it was devastation. And I met it in every moment. In the heat of it. And the exhaustion of it. Running to it. Running from it. And it was made real in those final moments. In those seconds before he died. In The Drift it was, it was rage. And it was under all those tangle of emotions that I felt when he died. My dad died. And when I looked at that photograph - it was the story of that play was my relationship with rage and it was under everything and so in the course of writing that play I found rage and I named her in a way. And gave her a voice and I met her and I eventually made peace with her. The following exercise and was introduced to me by the wonderful poet Caroline Bird.. And if there is ever a workshop advertised with Caroline Bird then make sure you go because it's a pretty life-changing, I think. Anyway so this exercise I often do in my writing and I would recommend it to you. For The Drift, the piece of writing that came out of this exercise opens the play and became a poem and I'm gonna read it to you now because I think that it will best show you what it is asking you to do. So after I finished reading it to you, what I'd like you to do is to choose the emotion. There may be the strongest the - driving emotion within the piece of writing

That you want to do or just pick an emotion. If you're not there yet just pick any emotion. And I want you to make it real. Make it a person, make it talk to you, move around and play and have a relationship with you. Okay, so I will read you Rage and then I will give you five minutes to write. And make real the emotion of your choice. So this is Rage. If I can remember it...

Rage took the steps two at a time. We locked her out and she pissed on the front step. Washing it away with Dettol, she kissed the back of my neck. We let her in eventually. Let her sleep in the downstairs lockup. Rage spoke to me there for amongst the bikes and teachers and the steer buckets I stepped out onto the hear her, to maybe speak back. The folk in the stair thought the whisper's a draft. Called in the council. You stopped speaking then. I took my box of lame My Little Ponies and I pushed rage right back against the wall She asked if she could play in my new room we played Connect Four, Saturday afternoon telly, cooried by the fire, we kicked out. I missed a bit there - doesn't matter. Saturday afternoon telly, cooried in by the fire, I kicked out, she kicked back We fought until we kissed, we kissed until we were it telt. We took it to the shed. We drank my mom's gin.

Okay, so now choose your own emotion, make it real And I'll give you five minutes to do that.

**[TAKE 5 MINUTES TO WRITE]**

Okay, I hope that you are still with me. And at the very least you have some words on the page. What I wanted to share with you in this workshop is the way I find to tell a story. And we all tell stories in different ways. You may be someone who always gets straight to the point. Maybe you meander and lose your focus and get distracted. Maybe you never quite finish your story. Maybe you tell one story but really you want to tell another. And I would say to you, try on all the different ways you can write a play. And see what fits and discard anything that doesn’t I think what we want as the audience is not only your story but We want to hear it the way you tell it. So good luck, enjoy and play And be yourself. Thank you so much.

[AUDIO ENDS]