

Simon Stephens: The Nature of Dramatic Action

Simon Stephens leads us through the third Bruntwood playwriting workshop, to help and support you as you go about writing your submission for this years' Bruntwood Playwriting Prize.

...For the next two hours I'm going to be with six of the most exciting emerging playwrights in the North West: Ben Mellor, Joe Ward Munroe, Josh Val Martin, Louise Wallwein, David Judge and Jayne Marshall.

I'm going to be looking at what I understand the nature of dramatic action to be and doing some exercises with you, and then hopefully we'll get some time to do a bit of writing at the end of the session, to write a scene.

I'm going to intersperse this examination of dramatic action with something slightly different. I'm doing something myself at the moment, this year. Every day this year I'm doing the same writing exercise, with the sole intention of generating new material. I hope it will be something that provides a new play for me, that inspires a new piece of work. It might inspire more than one. I'm going to share it with you now. It's very simple: Automatic writing.

It's a three part exercise, and I'm going to break up the parts over the whole session, doing one part at a time. The first part is this:

ONE

I'm going to give you 5 minutes, so time yourself doing it. The objective of the exercise is just to start kindling your brain, to start you thinking and writing. I'm going to ask you write autobiographically, a series of sentences of memories and every sentence just needs to start with the words, "I remember..."

Where in your life you remember these memories from is entirely up to you. It can be your earliest memory, it can be a sensory memory of your precognitive childhood, or it can be your most recent memory, the memory of the cup of tea you just had, and it doesn't need to go from the beginning to the end, it can jump about all the time.

The second rule is that for the whole five minutes you don't stop writing, so as soon as you finish one sentence you start another, "I remember..." and even if you don't know what you're about to say, just go and see what you generate and what you get out of that. I've done it every day this year and I'm going to continue doing it for the rest of the year, and hopefully it won't be an entire waste of 15 minutes a day! 15 minutes a day for 365 days is a lot of wasted time but hey, we're writers: our lives are defined by the remarkable amount of time that we waste!

One other rule is that it's really private writing. Whenever I do exercises like this, the only reason I do them is just for me, so don't share anything you've written and write freely. It's important to have that fearlessness when you're writing.

So, five minutes: "I remember...", "I remember..." You're five minutes start now!

.....

I always type this exercise every day and I'm a terrible typist, so at the end of the day I do a spellcheck on what I've written and it's surprising even in the distance of the day there are things that I've written that I'd forgotten about, and I hope that by the end of the year, doing this every day, there'll be material in there for a character or ideas for a situation. There's value in looking back on this material at a different time to writing it.

It's just about excavating fearlessly, about generating material and not crafting it. The process of writing a new play involves both the generation and the shaping of material and this is about the generation. It's the vomit, which later you'll sculpt to pay the mortgage!

15 years ago I was in a workshop at the Royal Court Theatre of a similar size—six emerging playwrights—working with a whole range of different workshop practitioners over the course of about a week and that week defined my next 15 years actually. The things I learnt and the things I thought about in that week sustained me and galvanised me for the following years of work. We did an amazing session with Stephen Jeffries, a lot with Dominic Cook, but one workshop that really lives with me is one we did with David Lan—a really beautiful playwright in the 80's and 90's, wrote exquisitely—and who is now one of the most exciting artistic directors in London theatre at the Young Vic. He's an extraordinary thinker and he used to be an anthropologist before a playwright and he kicked off his workshop by asking us this provocative question: What must all plays be about? Which provoked all 6 of us in the workshop to write the same answer: the plays can be about anything. As writers at any stage of our career if there's something we want to write about we were going to write it and nobody was going to tell us otherwise, Mr. David Lan. He listened to us talk and then he very carefully and politely told us, 'Your passion is infectious and will sustain you—hold onto it. Your anger is urgent, it's an energy you must never let go of, but of course you're all wrong, because plays can't be about anything. There's one subject which is essential to all Theatre, the essential subject of all plays. Every play that's ever been written and every play that will be written, and every play that's being written now for the 2015 Bruntwood Playwriting competition will be about the same thing, which is *people: humanity*. It's the innate subject of writing for theatre; what it is to be a human being.

I do a lot of teaching about playwriting and I work with a lot of kids and quite often I work with kids who hate literature, or hate what is perversely described as literacy—they hate the process of writing. I always say to them, 'I don't care if you don't enjoy writing. I don't care if you hate picking up a pen. If you're one of those people who when you're on the tube, or on the bus or whatever, as well as listening to your iPhone or looking at the adverts you also find yourself looking at the people and asking of them, 'who are you?' 'what do you want' 'where are you going?' 'what are you here for?' 'what kind of person are you?' If you've got that in you, then you have it in you to be a writer. If you've got that little splinter of glass in the soul that Graham Greene talked about, about people in their strangeness and their peculiarity, then you have it in you to be a writer.

Raymond Carver, American short story writer and poet. If you remember nothing else from this workshop, write down the name Raymond Carver! He said the most beautiful thing about writing. He said, 'You don't need to be an intellectual to be a writer. You don't need to be the cleverest kid in your class, or the cleverest kid on your street, all you need is the capacity to stand and stare open mouthed in wonder at the world'. And I think what you need to be a playwright is the capacity to stand and stare, open mouthed in wonder at people. I like that very much.

EXERCISE

And I like this next question very much. This is a question that I've asked at every workshop that I've ever taught in, and I've taught a lot of quite weird workshops: I've done a lot of prison work, I've taught a lot of children, a lot of teenagers... I did a really weird workshop with the chief executive of the Disney corporation in London which was quite surprising, and I've done a lot of work with emerging writers, and I always ask this question. It ties in to what I said about David Lan's comments earlier. This time I'm going to give you a MINUTE to answer.

The question my friends is this: **What is the difference between human beings and other animals?**

Your minute starts NOW!

Now let's have the writers here read out what they've written... and see if you notice any answers in common, or any profound disagreements, and see if the group can synthesise their answer to one which they agree on.

Ben: To steal a line from my friend, Lowri Evans of Eggs Collective who said in her recent show, "When are we going to realise we're just animals with weekends?" So my first answer was 'Weekends', but that would be dishonest to steal her line so I then write, "Our capacity for premeditated cruelty", cynically. And also our ability to send ourselves from the present into the past and future.

Simon: That capacity to send ourselves into the past and the future is intrinsically connected to the notion of a weekend isn't it? I was thinking, 'what is a weekend?' and to have a weekend you have to acknowledge a perception of time in that way, and it's also a social phenomenon, a weekend isn't it? You can't have a weekend if you lived in entire isolation. You only recognise a weekend as a collective social entity, so the idea that we live as social beings is intrinsically connected to the idea of a weekend. But the cruelty is lovely as well... "Cruelty is lovely!" says Simon Stephens on the internet!

Joe: As humans we like to believe we have free will, we make choices, we influence our own fate. Animals are driven by biological imperatives. And I was also going to write about love, the opposite of cruelty.

Josh: I only said one word, and that's morality.

Simon: And what do you understand morality to mean?

Josh: We have the concept of good and bad. We think that recycling is a 'good' thing, as opposed to just disposing of our waste on the floor for instance. That's a very simplistic example.

Simon: So the capacity to make judgement on our behaviour and agree on the ethics that underpin that judgement? So that if one person thought that recycling was bad, the likelihood isn't that recycling would become morally bad because you need agreement on something like that, which shifts and changes over time because there was a time when nobody even thought about recycling. So it's a collective sense of goodness and badness in behaviour?

I like morality's relationship to the nature of cruelty and love as well, because surely within cruelty and love there's a deeply moral centre to that antithesis isn't there.

David: Yes but I wrote the ability to hate, and then felt I had to add love because I believe hate and love are on the same line, but I realised that then goes against why I wrote the answer in the first place because a dog can love unconditionally, and a lion can fiercely protect its cubs, but for an animal to actually hate something, because it's a bit pissed off or because it's had something bad done to it, I just couldn't think of an example in my head because I've never seen, on all the animal programmes I've watched, something where an animal acts of hate.

And then as people were talking I circled 'ability', because it seemed people kept saying, 'humans have the ability to...', 'the ability to...' So maybe we're just more able than animals?

Simon: And where do you think that heightened ability comes from? To either hate, or love, or be cruel? To construct and engage in moral decisions, to make choices—where does that come from that ability?

David: the size of our brain I guess.

Simon: Yes, our brains. I'll come back to that—I heard a fascinating thing about the size and shape of our brains the other day. Right, Louise what do you have?

Louise: I have the ability to swap gender, so like a woman can be a peacock if she wants to be.

Simon: What do you mean by gender?

Louise: Well you get birds, for instance the Bowerbird—the male bird sets a wonderful stage, or a robin has a red breast or the peacock—the male bird always has all these fabulous colours, but the female birds always look a bit miserable from what I've seen. In the human world though, if the woman wants to be the peacock and wear all the pretty colours and set the stage she can.

Simon: So what you're saying is there's a distinction between, and correct me if I'm wrong here, there's a distinction between biological gender and cultural or social gender? And that, like morality, these constructions can be agreed on, disagreed on and challenged. So I like that idea, that what the human can do is agree with these social, collective ideas and then subvert them, push them forwards, interrogate them. I could have this conversation all day—it's fascinating. Jane go on...

Jane: Humans have the ability to inflict pain, cause war and wilfully destroy their environment for fun, or just because they can, but they also have the capacity to display the utmost compassion.

Simon: Beautiful, yes to demonstrate compassion for the sake of compassion. And again you kicked off with this word, the 'ability' to... and also like you said Joe to 'choose'. I'll talk about the capacity to choose in a bit. Did you notice anything about your answers that you agreed on or disagreed on?

David: Humans are hateful.

Simon: Yes it's quite bleak, the perception coming out of Manchester tonight ladies and gentlemen, that the human animal is a bleak, hateful, cruel!

Louise: I disagree with that. I think the human has a huge capacity to love and change. I think the human is beautiful.

Ben: That came out as strongly as the hate from our answers.

David: It's like you said in the beginning, 'lovely cruelty'!

Simon: Yes, so you're observing duality in the group. This group is talking about the human capacity for cruelty, but also the capacity for gentleness generosity and love.

Josh: We all were saying that humans are aware of their existence and because of that we're always trying to work out who we are as individuals and who we are collectively, it's that awareness that links them together.

Simon: And the capacity to be aware of one's own existence is also that which allows the capacity for us to empathise with others. We can imagine what others are experiencing—we can nurture and encourage empathy. Which is different to the way that a dog loves unconditionally—I doubt if your dog can imagine how you're feeling. It's just like, "OWNER-FOOD-LOVE!"

So that capacity for consciousness of our self allows the projection of empathy, which allows us to interrogate morality and gender and things like that.

Given the choice I would spend 2 hours talking about this—I think it's the most valuable thing a playwright can do, to sit and think about what a human being is. More important than anything you might learn about dramatic action, narrative, stage imagery, or dialogue. This is the meat and drink and the theatre—a really committed consideration of what the human animal is.

What I love about this question is I don't know the answer. There's no point in asking questions you know the answer to. I'm not an anthropologist, philosopher or theologian.

People's answers reveal the nature of the group. For instance when I asked the head of the Disney Corporation he said that humans are at the top of the food chain!

People's answers are indicative of their own truths.

And what's interesting, as writers—none of you talked about anything physiological. You all talked about the brain and consciousness. Nobody talked about opposable digits, for instance. The capacity to manipulate tools, or change our environment—which are key to our opposable digits. This heightened dexterity. We live all over the planet in all conditions, which is astonishing.

I'm not a biologist or zoologist—but I've asked this question for 15 years and it's sustained me as a playwright. To examine the nature of human consciousness. We are conscious of our consciousness. Other animals may know they exist, they feel pain, and fear. But, other animals don't reflect on that fear. I think it's this consciousness of consciousness that sits under our capacity for cruelty, our capacity for love, it sits under empathy and language, to defy social structures—to be aware of others' awareness.

This is the essence of human behaviour and the key difference between human beings and other animals.

For me it plays out on two axes:

- The axis of time
- The axis of space

To a remarkable degree we know where we are.

My cat, for example, knows where he can get fed, knows where all the beds are he can have a nice sleep on to avoid the children, or where the neighbours are who'll feed him chicken. But he doesn't know he's in East London, in the capital city of England—one of four countries in Great Britain, in the North West corner of Europe, in the Northern hemisphere of planet Earth, the third planet from the sun in one of several billion solar systems in our galaxy, the Milky Way, which is one of several billion galaxies in the known universe, which could just be one of a limitless amount of universes in what might be described as a multi-verse.

But I do know that. And you know that. And that understanding of where we are is utterly staggering. The human animal's understanding of where it is, is fascinating.

And further, we know when we are. Our capacity to remember is more profound than other animals' because we can inherit memories symbolically so we can remember not just our own experiences but because we have language and writing we can inherit the experiences of our parents and our grandparents.

The only mammal that lives to be a grandparent is the human being. Why does the human animal survive to be a grandparent? Because it's really useful if you can communicate linguistically. If you run

out of water, what do you do? You go and ask the person who was there the last time you ran out of water, and if you do that then you can keep telling stories and keep survival going.

Our capacity to remember, and even imagine the past of our species. To imagine what life was like on this planet before humans existed—that is mental. No dog can do that.

To imagine the formation of Earth and the Sun is extraordinary. But more than that, particularly as a playwright, I think is the capacity to imagine your future.

Specifically we know that we die. Our understanding of mortality has sustained me for 15 years. It fascinates me intellectually and it nourishes me as a dramatist—our understanding of our death.

Because we die and understand that, we very much want to edit, control, mould and inform our lives. We want stuff.

For me desire is the essence of identity. We are defined by what we want.

And it's beautiful what the spelling of the word, playwright tells us.

I was labouring under the delusion that it was some kind of spelling mistake by Samuel Johnson at first.

But it doesn't stem from the verb 'to write'. The noun 'wright' in the compound noun play-wright stems instead from the verb, 'wrought' or in the past tense 'wrought'. We are not writers--we don't write plays, we wrought them.

Just as a shipwright has wrought a ship, or a wheelwright has wrought a wheel or a cartwright has wrought a cart, a playwright has wrought a play.

Your work as a dramatist, as a playwright is not linguistic! It's not about creating beautiful sentences or writing good jokes-it's not about word choice. The work of the playwright is not literary, we are not literary people, we are theatre makers.

Our work is not to write language. It's to map behaviour. Our subject is not what people say, it's the stuff that people do, as they try to control their lives under the shadow of the knowledge of their own inextricable mortality.

Because we know we die, we want stuff. We confront obstacles to those desires and it's what we do to overcome those obstacles, what we do to get what we want. That is your subject.

We've all had the experience of writing the best speech anyone's ever written in the 21st century and then looking at it the next morning and it's just garbage. And it's because speech is not just the product of language. As an actor on stage, it's terrible to have a speech that doesn't actually do anything. The subject of the playwright is not to write speeches, but to look unerringly into the heart of their characters and ask them what do they want, what's stopping them from getting what they want, and what do they do to get it.

And that last bit—what do they do to get it—is dramatic action. The things that people do as they try to live a life under the shadow of their own mortality.

I'm being a bit of a motor mouth. Which is quite ironic, having given a speech saying it doesn't matter what you but what you do!

EXERCISE

I want to illustrate that with a little exercise which is slightly exposing...

I'm going to ask you to write down three things that you want. Make them specific, rather than abstract. Something concrete.

As a playwright it's very important to apply in concrete terms what a character wants.

But they have different timescales:

- 1) Write down something you want before you go to bed tonight. That you could realistically get, and what might stop you from getting it.
 - 2) Something you want by the end of the next year. In the next twelve months. Keep it concrete, which is harder now with the broader timescale. And something that might stop you from getting it as well.
 - 3) Something you want before you die. That is concrete, and truthful. And what might stop you from getting it?
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Now let's share some of these.

Jane: Before I go to bed tonight I would like a cup of tea. But the problem is I'm probably not going to get it because I won't get in until 11 o'clock at night.

Simon: And you can't drink that cup of tea that late—that would be insanity!

I'd like to suggest that with what Jane has answered with there in around nine words has given you a more profound insight into her life than if she'd answered the question, 'what kind of person are you?' It's the specificity that allows us to imagine a life. We get an insight because that is such a specific image. And David?

David: For me, a conversation with someone I'd like to spend more time with.

Simon: As opposed to me! And what would stop you getting that?

David: That person not picking up the phone.

Simon: And David's given us an insight there that demands we use our imagination. It demands that we use our empathy. Effectively, as an audience, when we confront a desire which is specific and concrete, we're encouraged to use our empathy.

The other thing that happens to me, as well as getting the sense that I know these people more deeply, I really want them to get what they want. I really want to use the 5 minute break to help Jane get a cup of tea! I really want her or him to answer the phone. There's no reason why I should care if David's imagined other answers the telephone, but there's a part of me that does.

So two things happen when you confront desire that is specific. You recognise yourself in the other person and subsequently you empathise with and share their desire.

Let's see what happens when you extend the timeline a bit. It's more difficult to keep it specific. Now, Louise...

Louise: I want to travel to South America and travel up and down the continent on a train. And the thing that will be stopping me is money and possibly that there is no train!

Simon: Ha yes! That does the entire span of the continent! Beautiful and Josh...

Josh: Mine's to go to the Shetland Islands and see my whole family there, but the likelihood of that happening is very slim because everyone's very busy, and lives around the whole UK.

Simon: They were wonderful answers and for me those two things were even deeper than. I got a deeper insight and I really wanted them to get it. Let's see what happens again when you extend it to an entire lifetime, and even harder now to be specific.

Joe: My wish was to be financially stable to some extent. And the thing in the way was being a playwright.

Simon: Just put a puppy on stage, you'll be sorted! To be financially stable OK, and it's the tension between financial stability for yourself and the other people that may involve, and a commitment to pursue the working life of a writer. The tension between the work and your life. It's profound I think.

Ben: I think I can be more specific but I write, 'before I die I want to have learned how to be alone, and to be with others.'

Simon: Right so, how would we make that specific?

Ben: Well it's being distracted that would be stopping me from that, so I guess it's that I want to have learned how to not be distracted.

Simon: To make it more specific I was thinking you might have wanted to go and live in a monastery for six months, or to have learned to force yourself to turn your iPhone off for six months or six weeks. It's a really interesting example because the frustration with it how to be specific.

When you're conceiving your plays, I suggest to you that your work must involve this consideration of a desire of a character, not because Aristotle says you need to or David Mamet or Robert McKee or Max Stafford Clark says, but because being human is being conscious of time and, therefore, having desire, then that's your work as a playwright.

If we can get a scene from these short term examples—to get a cup of tea but coming in at 11 o'clock—then you can really get a play from these longer term stories, as long as they're specific.

So when you're conceiving these plays, if you ask yourself at the heart of the character, what do they want before the day is done, or what do they want in the next year, and what do they want before they die, and you can force yourself to be specific with that, then the likelihood of that generating story, narrative, plays, becomes more acute.

Ben: My problem with that is always, do *they* know what they want?

Simon: Ah that's a REALLY good question!

Ben: Is it just what they would say at that moment of time if you asked them.

Simon: What I would say is it doesn't matter if they know or not, what matters is that you know. The writing process is about shaping that instinct. And in order to shape it you need to marshal it. You're not a writer, you're a wright, so your characters may well not know, in fact you could deliberately make your characters not know, or even better you can make your characters think they want something which is totally the opposite of what you know they actually do want, but what you can't do is get to the final draft of that play and not know the answer to that question.

Sometimes it takes a long time—12 maddening drafts of meetings with literary managers and they'll always at some point say, what do they want? One thing you have to do is take responsibility for knowing that before you deliver your draft.

My first professionally produced play was called *Bluebird* and it was actually my eighth play, and I wrote it along with the seven previous plays and the subsequent play *Christmas*, were written just not knowing and I had characters in rooms just talking to each other.

Christmas was my first commission and was rejected by the commissioning theatre—the Royal Court, and the director who worked on the reading before rejecting it said to me, 'Your problem is Simon, that you write too well'. And I remember thinking that it was a very curious problem for a writer to have, and it took me a year to realise that what he meant was although I might write too well, I might have written my plays well, I hadn't *wrought* them well.

And the key thing I learned in that year—2000, the year of my residency—was to realise that my work wasn't writing, wasn't being led by the character, but to take control of the material to shape it and marshal it. Over that year I changed the way I wrote.

I made the process of writing dialogue the last thing I did, and not the first thing I did. And for my next play, *Hérons* I spent nine months writing that whilst knowing absolutely what those characters wanted and what was stopping them from getting it and what they did to try and get what they wanted. For all that time I planned it and the last thing I wrote was the dialogue. That was how I wrote the subsequent 17 plays.

Our work is to make sure that we know.

TWO

Now I want you to write for five minutes. And every sentence this time is going to start with the phrase, 'I notice'...

So we're moving from the past tense to the present tense. And you can be noticing sounds, or smells around you, or feelings like needing to go for a pee or finding this workshop frustrating!

Five minutes start NOW!

So how was reflecting on those things? Different to the 'I remember...?'

Josh: It's like when you're in pitch black darkness and slowly your ears start to tune a bit more, so you hear and see the obvious things at first and then slowly you start to notice that there's a singer outside or...

Simon: Yes, lovely I think it's so important to exercise that level of alertness. To be alert to the sounds and smells of the world. I love doing this exercise in places I've never been to before—take your notebook and go to a part of Manchester you've never been to before, spending five minutes on remembering, five minutes on noticing and five minutes on the third exercise we'll do in a bit.

EXERCISE

Now we're going to take a look at the excerpt you'll have there, which is from the last play I had on in this theatre, called *Blindsided*.

I thought I'd use it to see if we can test some of this – and examine how some of this thinking can make it into the first two pages of the play.

It's the opening scene, the opening encounter of the play—we don't need to give it any context. **Just read it now... [See handout link]**

When I wrote that, in my head there was one character who very much wanted something from the other, and the other character is acting in response. One person acting in desire, and the other in response.

Saying that, who would you say is acting out of their desire? It's like a tennis match where one character is serving – they are acting out of their desire – and the other character is receiving the serve and acting out of their response.

David: Cathy.

Simon: Cathy, yes she's acting in desire. It's not that John's not doing anything, but it's Cathy's serve, yes? If we agree on that, what would we say that Cathy wants?

David: John?

Simon: Yes! It's a basic kernel of human behaviour: Cathy wants John. It's a useful starting point to any scene – if you're stuck for an idea of what to start a scene with, I have to tell you, going to Moscow or getting John or the equivalent thereof, work as starting points.

EXERCISE

Now we're going to look only at Cathy. I want you to look at the things Cathy is doing to John. Not what she's saying to him – not the language – we're not thinking as writers but as wrights. What is she doing to John?

When you think that her tactics towards John, as she tries to get what she wants – which is John. When her tactics change, I want you to note down the tactic being used. Using the handout at home, if you can identify a tactic Cathy is using in pursuit of John, make a note of it.

1) CATHY: What are you doing?

Louise: She's calling his attention

Simon: Yes. Now, can you describe that tactic in one word that fits in a sentence that starts with “Cathy” and ends with “John”. So “Cathy [somethings] John”. What is she doing?

David: Cathy interrogates John.

Simon: That would be one word, yes but it wasn't quite what you were saying, Louise. Is there one single word that describes getting his attention?

Ben: Summons.

Simon: Yes, that's a really nice word.

Joe: Hails?

Simon: Hails, great. Summons or hails. Let's keep going.

2) What are you doing outside our house?

Ben: Attacks?

Simon: Yes, because she's kind of claiming what?

David: Territory.

Simon: She's claiming territory yes, so she's warning. So attack and warn. Carry on.

3) Are you completely deaf or something?

Joe: Insults.

Simon: Yes, anything else?

Ben: Mocks.

Simon: Insults and mocks, great. So in the first line we've got Summons/Hails, Attacks/Warns, Insults/Mocks. Great. Carry on.

4) Why are you standing outside our house?

David: I'd say 'Hounds'

Simon: Nice, hounds is great. On that second repetition of the question she's hounding him, lovely.

5) You're doing what?

David: I'm running out of words!

Louise: Something about status.

Simon: Yes status is in there, so belittling him?

Joe: Something to do with confusing because the question isn't a question, it's just like you say with tennis, she's bouncing it back.

Josh: Undermining?

Simon: Undermining, great.

Ben: Or teasing.

Simon: Teasing, lovely. Right, carry on.

6) Are you being serious?

Jane: Is it confrontation almost?

Simon: So confronts him. Great, let's keep going. And only spot them when the tactics change.

7) You don't exactly look like a politician.

Joe: Demeans.

Simon: Great.

8) You look more like a psychopath than a politician.

David: She's unwrapping him.

Simon: Unwrap is pretty good, but there's a better one I'm sure.

Ben: Unmasks.

Simon: Unmasks is really good.

Ben: She sees through.

Simon: The other thing I was thinking is, "You don't exactly look like a politician." Isn't she also, to use that word you used earlier, Louise, in a different way she's peacocking, because she's illustrating her understanding of the convention of what politicians are meant to look like.

Louise: I thought she was flirting there.

Simon: Well great, but flirting doesn't work because you can't do Cathy flirts John, but what can you do with it instead?

Joe: Seduces?

Simon: We can use seduces, yeah.

9) You don't talk like a politician either. A politician wouldn't say "Flipping heck" Not right to somebody's face.

David: She's involving him now.

Simon: She's involving him, great. Inviting him. To involve and invite. So to read that list back, what's interesting about it?

Joe: That you can turn something fairly neutral – like I was thinking when she says, “A politician wouldn’t say “Flipping heck”, basically she’s educating him but the intention on it isn’t benevolent so it really does something to it.

Jane: The way she’s talking to him as well – she’s got the power at this stage and she’s in control, particularly because he’s on her doorstep as well. That’s a major theme in the play, power.

Simon: Yes, the playing and shifting of power.

Josh: It’s a slight tangent but you were saying earlier when you were *wraughting* your plays up to the subsequent 17 – would you think in these transitive verbs, what exactly is happening? O would you just think in terms of plot and then come back to this process?

Simon: I think it would be impossible to write any scene being too conscious of the transitive verb before you write a single line of dialogue, but I use this as a corrective, so it’s a redrafting tool, but whenever I write any scene, what I definitely have is a very specific objective for each character. And the making of the scene necessarily is like a tennis match-the pursuit of that specific objective and that’s what the scene is built on and then the writing of dialogue becomes the exploration of that pursuit. But the redrafting of it is making sure that I can do that exercise to every line. And if there’s any line of dialogue that I can’t do it to, I either cut the line (since the only reason it’s there is I quite like the writing in it) or I change it so it has a specific action. There’s no point having a line in the play which is just for my entertainment because in the end our job isn’t to entertain ourselves, it’s to change the people watching our plays. To affect them in some way. And the way I do that is to make sure I’ve got the desire and I’ve got the action. And for me the action comes out of the tension between the desire and the obstacle. So I knew in the writing of this that Cathy wants John. The obstacle is that he’s actually trying to burgle her house, so what tactics does she use to seduce him away from his life of crime and into his life of being Cathy’s boyfriend, were the tactics that became the essence of the scene. The dramatic action of the scene. Does that make sense? Do ask me to clarify.

And what I think is really beautiful in playwriting is when there’s a profound difference between the objective and the action. What can make a scene boring is when there isn’t any difference between objective and action so if Cathy wants John and the scene starts with Cathy saying, ‘Oh you’re beautiful’ then that would be boring - if there’s no tension, no space, between the objective and the action then there’s no space for the audience to interpret and drama moves people when they’re engaged and they become engaged when they’re asked to be interpretive. Although I might not do it in the first draft, I’ll definitely be conscious of it at some point and won’t show it to anyone until I’ve *wrought* it properly.

Ben: How many times would you allow a character to repeat the same action before you cut the line?

Simon: Ha. Uh, I don’t think it’s a mathematical thing, but an instinctive one and I’d certainly be alert to that repetition. I think sometimes it comes the other way round actually, sometimes it’s about redrafting a scene and knowing there’s something not working but not being able to articulate what that is and so I’ll look at the actions and make sure there’s a tension between the objective and the action and make sure there’s a variety of different actions. And when I notice that there isn’t, when I’ve got this in-articulable thing telling me there’s something wrong in the scene, often it’s that so it’s a redrafting thing as much as anything.

For me this stuff is the making of dramatic action – the work of the playwright. This interrogation of the things people do to one another, that's our job and it's infinitely harder than writing great speeches and beautiful dialogue but it's urgent.

EXERCISE

Shall we have a go at it? Let's write a scene in 15 minutes.

Let me tell you something about writing scenes. In my career I've met possibly a thousand playwrights – the amount of workshops I've done and the number of times I've been lucky enough to meet playwrights from Saint Carol Churchill to the ten year old kids I've taught playwriting to. If I were to ask any of the thousand playwrights what conditions are your favourite to write in, I don't think there's any single one that would want this time pressure, surrounded by other playwrights!

The point here isn't what you produce, it's about the process. Just 15 minutes of thinking about using some of this stuff in a process.

So go back to your notebooks and read what you wrote about remembering and noticing, and I suspect that in those two paragraphs there will be people other than you – either someone you remember or somebody who you notice – there'll be somebody other than you.

If there is somebody put a little circle around it.

David: Can it be an animal?

Simon: Ha, no! It has to be a person. And I'm going to ask you to use that person as a starting point for a character, and don't be embarrassed about using someone dear to you. You can change them.

I'm going to ask you a series of questions about that person and these are questions I often ask myself when I'm writing.

It's profoundly unlikely that you'll know the answer for the real person, but I'd like you nevertheless to answer them, and as soon as you do that the person stops being the real person and becomes a fictional character and you can change their name.

1) What is the character called? Not this person, this character based on a real person, what are they called?

2) How old are they? If you want to change that too then do. I've definitely created characters by knowing people in real life and then imaging them when they're older. Imaging them when they're 80 or 9 years old.

3) What gender are they? And with at least five of my plays I've started off writing a male character and then changed them to female. Port, Harper Reagan, the grandmother at the end of Pornography started like that. It's really good if you've got a character who's interesting and then you make them female or vice versa, see what happens.

4) Where were they born? Make it specific.

5) Who was in the family they were born into? And who came into that family after they were born. Did anyone leave/arrive?

6) Where did their family get their money from? My dear friend and brilliant director, Ramin Gray said to me, 'You only need to know two things about a character: who they're sleeping with and where they get their money from.' It's simplistic but as a writer really key thing to think about.

7) Where do they live now?

8) Who do they live with?

9) Where do they get their money from now? The difference between those two financial answers – the difference between where somebody's parents got their money from and where they get their money from is the story of a life.

10) What do they want before they go to bed tonight?

11) What do they want before the end of the next 12 months?

12) What do they want before they die?

EXERCISE

Now I'd like you to imagine this character in a place they feel really comfortable, but maybe not their home. Somewhere else they feel comfortable. And with them in this space is a stranger they have never seen before. You can discover the stranger in the process of writing. I've based the choice of somewhere they feel comfortable on that scene from *Blindsided*.

Now I'd like you to choose three of the transitive verbs we listed earlier:

Interrogates/summons/hails/attacks/warns/insults/mocks/hounds/diagnoses/belittles/confuses/undermines/teases/confronts/demeans/unwraps/unmasks/flirts with/peacocks/involves/invites/educates

Write down a clean piece of paper 1-14 with a few lines between each number.

Take your time with this, but start with a quick 5 minute draft. Then spend more time with the approach if it works for you.

Write a scene in which your character at various points in the 14 lines of the scene does those three actions to the stranger. You've got a character now who you've spent a little bit of time on, and in the process of them acting on the stranger you will discover who the stranger is through their response.

What was enjoyable about that?

Josh: I enjoyed finding out about the stranger as he responded. It was like, ah this is who he is.

Ben: The quick-fire structure and not having the luxury of over thinking it.

Simon: How was the process of writing to a transitive verb?

Louise: That was a lovely structure I thought, and then it gave it a rhythm and became natural that it would go onto the next bit.

Jane: It's the first time I've not waffled. Straight to the point.

Simon: Yes and some writers will use this as a redrafting tool, and some will use it to generate material. With directors and actors who use this process a lot – taking the techniques of actioning, and if you're interested in that read Max Stafford Clark's *Letters to George* because he defined it for a generation of British theatre directors and it's a beautiful book.

So I took his actors' technique and turned it into a writer's technique to take responsibility for those actions myself.

THREE

To finish with the third part of my exercise, just to let off steam.

Different subject, same idea. It's writing a paragraph or series of sentences. And this time having done the past with 'I remember' and the present with 'I notice' I'd like you to go to the future and write things that you will, so 'I will' and then the sentence. Write automatically for five minutes starting now.

QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

Thank you, I really enjoyed that. Now I'm going to answer some questions that have been sent in by the audience.

Andrea on Twitter: When you write a play do you think about the characters after it's finished.

Simon: Ordinarily I really don't and sometimes I find it odd when people ask me about their future. After the play finishes the characters become the actors and they're in the bar. The life of the characters only really exists in the life of the play and they're not real. They have an imaginary life which I imagine as long as it informs their behaviour but their actual concrete future doesn't inform their behaviour. But weirdly the only times when I have are on my versions of *A Dolls House* or *Cherry Orchard* or *Curious Incident*. These times when my plays are based on other people's material. But in my own material I don't, the characters only ever exist on the stage.

Book Worm on Twitter: In the process of writing how much do you think about it being on stage and how much do you just focus on the words.

Simon: I visualise it completely on stage and not just any stage, I'm fortunate to write for particular stages so actually I imagine it on specific stages but the fact that I'm commissioned is irrelevant. You can, the people writing for the Bruntwood competition can go and look at the Royal Exchange stage and imagine something taking place on that stage. Through images or if you're lucky enough to be near Manchester. It's really freeing to imagine it on a specific stage and it also forces the discipline – as you'll know as an actor when it feels like a play hasn't been written for the stage at all because it feels like they're asking impossible things – so I always visualise the stage.

Naomi: Which of your plays have the most drafts and which has had the fewest.

Simon: Great question. Probably the early plays had the most drafts because they were written without me really knowing what I was doing so probably *Bluebird* and *Christmas*, although the screen plays necessarily get more drafts because there a lot more people telling you what should go in them. The stage plays as I've gone on have tended to get fewer drafts. *Three Kingdoms* had quite a lot of drafts though because it was written for a very specific company of actors and that company of actors kept changing! So I had to rewrite to accommodate different actors. The play that's had

fewest is a monologue called *Sea Wall*, which has only had one sentence changed in its entire duration, which was me adding a sentence which explained why when diving the character might need to take a bag of bread with him into the sea, to feed the fish. For the first performance of that play, the phrase, 'to feed the fish' wasn't there so the audience were left with an image which, even for Andrew Scott who performed it, was really confusing. He was like, 'why are you taking bags of bread with you to go diving?' So I added that.

On Twitter: With pacing, should you look at the narrative on a micro or macro e.g. my scene or the wider play?

Simon: I think you need to look at all the scenes. At some point you need to take responsibility for marshalling the whole narrative of the play and examine structure – how the scenes fit into that narrative, how you shape it in order to dramatise the effect you're trying to affect your audience with, and then even line by line what the characters are doing with each line. You need to take both the bird's eye view and the worm's eye view; you need to go above it and into it as well so it's not one or the other. Different writers will have different perspectives at different times. Some writers will write their plays not knowing at all about the structure or narrative and just write line by line and others will know everything before they write a word of dialogue. What I would advise writers to do is to identify what they're weak on and exercise that. What I always say is, 'I've never in my life been to the gym but let's imagine I am a person who has remarkable biceps, then I would want to do bicep exercises because I could lift more and feel better about myself, but if I had a trainer who was any good what they would say I should really do is exercise the triceps because otherwise I'll end up with really weird arms—the end effect would be flawed. I think creativity is born out of instinct and intellect, working in opposition in the same way that a bicep and tricep might. So what you need to do, in the gym of your art, is identify what you're weak on and work on that. So if you're somebody who loves writing without knowing where they're going, then you need to work on structure; if you love structure then maybe you need to write something where you don't know what's going to happen next. But eventually you need to do all of it, that's your job.

QUESTION: For an audience to empathise do characters need to have likeable desires?

Simon: Not likeable desires just real desires. I think. That's a really good question. I think truthful desires rather than likeable desires. I'm trying to think of characters who have dishonourable desires but who hopefully people are going to empathise with. If you think about Macbeth, he's a mass murderer, a liar, a psychopath but why do we care about Macbeth? Because we recognise ourselves in him. Not because we're murderous psychopaths but because we want to live the lives that we want to live, maybe because we want the comfort of a life which we can control. It's not making the desires likeable, it's making the desires truthful I think. And making desires really likeable, you might end up hating the character anyway because they'd seem really twee.

QUESTION: Do you have any tips on titling for someone who finds it really difficult?

Simon: It's really interesting. I normally choose something that's just totally irrelevant! That I like the sound of! That then I can justify metaphorically in some way. There was a period of my life when I just randomly named plays after birds: *Bluebird* and *Hérons*, but they were in some way related to the metabolism of the play. Then they were named randomly after musical forms: *Country Music*, *Motortown*, *Punk Rock* would be three examples of that. Don't worry about getting the title right. Sometimes titles resonate really strongly. When I decided to write a play about a girl leaving Stockport I did a few days research on my home town which is Stockport-the suburb of Manchester

and then heading back to London after doing my research and this train pulled into the station and the LED sign of the train was broken, so rather than reading 'Stockport' because it was broken at the beginning it just read '...port'. So this train came in with 'port' as the title and it was like it was a gift so I would say be alert to the words that are around you. Don't worry about describing the play- capture the metaphor of it, capture the essence of it which might be a piece of music, it might be a word, it might be a line from a poem like 'On the Shore of the Wide World'. It might be an image of a place or a name of the character, but don't worry about describing the play, just get the spirit of the thing.