

Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Poetry and Plays

Week 1 Part 4 – Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Poetry and Plays. Week 1 Part IV: Scott Bradley.

>>[Text on screen] We are very proud to bring you the perspectives of authors from around the world, and trust that you will find their perspectives valuable. Because some of our contributing authors are nonnative speakers of English, we suggest that you turn on video captions. You can turn on captions by clicking the “cc” button at the bottom right of the video.

>>[Text on screen] Glossary of Terms on Week 1 Videos page.

>>During our class videos you may hear our poets and playwrights use terms that are new to you. We've created a list of key terms and definitions that you can refer to at any point during our video lectures. This list is available on the videos and readings class page, where you can read it or download it as a PDF. If you would like to find and review these terms as you watch each class video, you can stop this video, go back to the videos and readings class page, and download the PDF. There you can play this video and each of the following class videos. If you have any questions about these terms, we encourage you to ask your teaching team in the weekly class discussions.

>>[Text on screen] Scott Bradley on Evocative Monologues.

>>Scott Bradley is an American writer, performer, and director. His writings include the plays SEED; TROCADERO ROSE; PACKING; PUCKER UP!; THE WOOD PROBLEM; and book and lyrics for the musical WE THREE LIZAS. Bradley is cofounder of Creators Lab, Artistic Associate of About Face Theater, an MFA Candidate at the Iowa Playwrights' Workshop, and a member of the Dramatists Guild, AEA, and SAG-AFTRA.

>>I'm Scott Bradley, I'm a playwright and performer and director, and I'm currently an MFA Candidate in the Iowa Playwrights' Workshop. And so I'm going to talk just a little bit about how I approach character, particularly for monologues and in developing work. And it's really the same for me, what I do. I'm an incredibly visual person, a visual storyteller, so I always begin with an image, that's what always comes to me first. It's an image that makes me jump, that really resonates for me. It can be a real image, something from a photo. It can be something that I conjure in my mind. A recent play that we just performed in festival called SEED actually started in... I had come across a picture of a teenage boy in the Midwest who had recently killed himself, and his face really stuck with me for about two years before I sort of came upon the story that image sort of launched out, and it's become a larger play now. But it can be an image of a possible character, a place that evokes character, it can be a piece of art, an old ironing board, anything like that. And from that place... I'm a hippie, and so it always, for me, that image always launches me toward ideas about injustice, and lack of fairness. The world is an unfair place. And normally the images that come to me immediately

evoke an idea of inequity that's happening socially, for us in the current moment. And not only am I interested in examining how we are confronting injustice right now, but also, as a dramatist, it's conflict, it is drama. So it's, at its essence, dramatic, and therefore interesting, and hopefully then interesting for an audience to want to explore with you as well.

Once I get that image and consider the social ramifications that I'm really interested in exploring, then I collect as much raw data as I can about that character, possibly caught in that moment that I'm really interested in. It can be real data, or made up. A character's age, their gender, their ethnicity, where they grow up, where they live now—those could certainly be different, and often are quite different—what their parents are like, do they know their parents. All those sorts of things. And then I start writing out a list of that kind of raw data so that I get an idea about who this person might be. And then for me, I take myself into a couple of free-writing exercises, which, for me, means sitting down, timing myself sometimes—maybe it's ten minutes—then I take a pen to a journal and I start writing stream-of-consciousness about that character, about that situation, and just let my pen flow, whatever comes out, allow everything. And that starts to really get inside what's underneath the image, why it's resonating for me. I get to see what that's doing to me as a writer. Once I finish that, I look that over and then I will give myself a second free-writing exercise in which I write for ten minutes, which goes by really quickly when you're free-writing, in which I will write as the character. So I'll look at the stuff about the character, the free-writing exercise I did, and then I'll sit down and I will attempt to just free-write as the character. Again, stream-of-consciousness, I'm not interested in editing myself. It's really just an opportunity for the character to get to speak out. That goes for about ten minutes.

I finish that, and then I will start to... once I've written it out, I look it back over and then sometimes I'll record myself doing it, but then I will speak it out loud, what I've just written. I'll speak the monologue out loud, even if it's disjointed, if it's fragmented, if it's words, if it's phrases—it's just letting it come out loud. Because I'm writing it for performance—for an actor to perform for people—I want to hear what it sounds like coming out of my mouth. I'll listen for phrases that feel really right, that feel like the character. I'll listen to maybe a word that I wouldn't probably say myself, but that this character somehow wrote on the page. I'll listen for rhythm: rhythm of maybe a couple of phrases that come together that I think, "Oh, that's interesting, that sounds like them." And then I'll pull those pieces out that jump out to me and I'll begin to build on those. Sometimes it surprises me; sometimes a character that I thought... I thought I was creating a male character that I find out is a female character. I find out that their older than I thought that I was initially writing them to be because their voice is coming out older. And I allow that to guide me. One of the things, which I'll talk about in a moment, is that voice all of a sudden I realize is not coming from today, it's coming from a place in history. Something about the voice says, Oh, this feels like 1970s, this feels from that area, and I'll just allow that.

Once I've looked at all of that, then I'm looking to write towards a monologue, which is often how I create character in even larger plays that are about multiple characters in dialogue: I'll create a monologue that helps me define and really encapsulates the essence of who that character is. And I'll create the monologue initially by trying to find what, in that moment, they really need to speak to. What is their deep need? It could be: do they need to reveal a secret? Do they need food? Do they need to be treated like they matter? Do they need to quash a rebellion? What is it that they need in that moment? And then I will just sit and write that need. I usually give myself a page, sometimes it goes more than that, but normally I try to fill out a page of just a monologue that this character would just speak. I write that out, I may walk away from it and then come back. And then I start to

sculpt that into something that might be presentable, and also may grow into something much larger, into a larger piece. So that's basically an approach that I take to most all of my work when I first am encountering a character, when I'm first wanting to launch into a new piece.

[Text on screen] Monologues to Connect the Audience with a Character's purpose and POV:
TROCADERO ROSE by Scott Bradley.

A couple years ago, I was looking at queer activism in this moment around marriage equality in the country, of which I was very much a part, of that activism. And I was looking at the signs, you know, in the streets with some of these protests, I would call them I guess, but they felt incredibly tame. Compared to the time that had been spent in the street fighting for our lives around violence, through the AIDS epidemic. It felt incredibly tame. And I was thinking about some of my friends and mentors who are now long dead of AIDS or self-destruction, and what would they think in this moment? What would they think of this time that we're currently in? And the way that we are now asking politely for marriage rights? Which, thankfully, we have now. But what would that feel like to them? And I realized that the struggles we were really facing and trying to tackle head-on in San Francisco and in New York in the late 70s are really not very different than the struggles that queer people are facing today in Des Moines, Iowa, or Topeka, Kansas. And that is the struggle just to be given a chance to experience life as a full human being. To see ourselves as worthy of respect and love and health. And laws that protect us.

And so I thought... I wanted to set a story in 1979, specifically in this moment in history, 1979, in San Francisco, in the year following the assassination of Harvey Milk, who was a huge champion of equality, when the gay community there was really finding their strength to overcome violent injustice in that moment, and were flying headlong into a plague that we have no idea is coming. And so I was really interested in looking at that moment, because I felt like... that feels resonant to me now, in us just having come out of this violent fight for AIDS funding and visibility, where we're still fighting that stigma but we seem to be in this sort of peaceful little land. And it scares me a little bit that we don't see what might be around the corner. So this is a short monologue I created early when I was searching for the main character's voice for this play that I want to set in this time. The character's name is Margot Rose, it's based on my very first gender-queer character that I ever created back when I was eighteen, which was the nickname for Queen Elizabeth of England's sister, Margaret Rose. Margot Rose... and I found that Margot Rose is a trans woman, she is in her early thirties, she is a club performer, nightclub performer, lip-sync, drag queen in that world, and prostitute. I based her voice on a friend of mine from back in the day, someone with real bravado and a huge laugh that hides this desperate need to be seen as she wanted to be seen. And part of my research in doing this, I got on and I YouTubed interviews of people from the 1970s, in that time, in San Francisco, in the queer community, who identified as trans, and also just a lot of people in that era and in that station of life, and how they spoke. And this is just a brief monologue, early in the play:

"Everyone have a drink! Armando, pour you and Dell a couple shots on me. Listen to Margot, now. The night Harvey died, all you bitches got to light candles and fill the streets from Castro to city hall. It was beautiful! I know: I got to watch it on a hospital TV. So I want to make a toast. When someone like Harvey gets taken away, it's easy to think, 'Shit! What's the point? We finally got one of us in city hall and he didn't last a year.' But remember, Harvey Milk died at motherfuckin' city hall, doing exactly what he dreamed of doing, and he didn't do it just for him, he fought for all of us. You

want to make sure Harvey didn't die in vain? Then you better grab hold of life by its big, hairy balls. If there's something you want, you go get it. 1979 is almost here, my babies. Our time has come!"

That monologue was one of the earliest things I tried shaping for Margot. I wanted to convey her warrior spirit. I wanted us in the audience to think for a moment, "Wow! She is fierce. She is going to set the world on fire." And I wanted that so that through this lens of history that we now have, we know that she won't get the chance to ever do that. AIDS is going to wipe her out and many of the other characters that she's speaking to before that moment ever comes. And that, to me, is unjust. That, to me, resonates in the same way that... I have to say, you know, my husband and I living in Chicago everyday could walk down the street holding hands in the neighborhood that we lived in in Chicago. I now live in small-town Iowa; I'm not safe walking down the street holding hands with him. That's unjust. And there are so many other people like that in the world. And I want us to tell those stories. I feel like those stories are important. Nina Simone said: "I'll tell you what freedom is to me: No fear." And that's what I write toward. I'm interested in examining, calling out, inequities that breed fear so that hopefully we all get to find and share a little more freedom. And that's why I write.