

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

Week 2 Part 1 – Transcript

>>[Text on screen] Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Poetry and Plays. Week 2 Part I: Peter Gilsheredin.

>>[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 2 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] Peter Gilsheredin on Dialogue and Building Blocks.

>>Peter Gilsheredin is an American playwright. His plays include *COURTNEY AND CAROLINE*; *RITU COMES HOME*; *COCKFIGHT*; *TOPSY TURVY MOUSE*; and *WHAT MAY FALL*. He has received The Smith Prize awarded by the National New Play Network for outstanding political work. He has taught at Indiana University, Bloomington; and Fordham University.

>>My name is Peter Gilsheredin, I am a playwright. I have been writing plays since I was seventeen- or eighteen-years-old, and I came here to Iowa when I was in my twenties, and I'm back to do this interview and for other reasons as well.

So I wanted to talk a little bit today about how I go about even getting into the world of a play—how I go into writing dialogue.

[Text on screen] Using Word Choice in Dialogue to Express Big Social Issues: “Abu Ghraib” by Peter Gilsheredin.

So one of my favorite plays that I've ever written—the best play... one of the best plays I've ever written, I think—is a play that was inspired by the events at Abu Ghraib, which was this terrible event in Iraq where soldiers tied up prisoners and were mocking prisoners, degrading them, abusing

them. And one of the ring-leaders of that situation was a young woman named Lynndie England, who was a very small woman, she was maybe five-foot-one, and while she was in Iraq she fell in love with... I don't know if she was in love with him, but she had an affair with one of her superiors who was the ring-leader of all of this abuse that was happening in the prison, so she sort of went along with it. It was a story that was really striking because it was all over the national news media, and I was really taken by it—I was really taken by this idea of this woman who was just this woman from West Virginia who did this horrific thing, and everybody was just piling on her and saying, "Well what an awful beast she is. What a terrible person." And I just got to thinking, well, what would I be like in that situation? What would happen to me? Well the part of the story that was so interesting to me was that she got pregnant, and she got pregnant with the man who was her superior, and they had this baby. And I was imagining what it might be like for this baby when he grew up and found out who his parents were. That was a really interesting idea to me. To think, how do you explain these photographs to this kid, right? How does that work, exactly?

So I've never been in the military, I don't really come from people in the military; I began to ask myself, how do I write this play that's sort of based on someone who's real, but make it fictional. It's a really tricky thing. And I didn't really feel comfortable getting in there and trying to sort of write a military play. So I wanted to set it in the future, and I wanted to set it in America, and I wanted it to be a kind of domestic drama, and I began to ask myself how I would start. And so this is what I did, how I started this play. Just this bid-ideas play, and this scary play to write, this political play. I basically got out a dictionary—this is so weird—I got out a dictionary, and I turned to five random places in the dictionary and pulled out words, and I wrote them down. All I said that I had to do was to sit down and to write until I reached those five words. That was my very simple challenge as a writer. And one of the words that I pulled out of the dictionary was, weirdly enough, was a word that I'd never heard before called "thermoanesthesia." And thermoanesthesia is the inability to tell the difference between hot and cold. I thought, how am I going to make that work? What does that do?

So I ended up creating this fifteen-year-old boy who was telling everyone that he had thermoanesthesia. And everyone thought he was really weird for saying that. And his parents thought he was a little bit kooky and teenager-y. And that fifteen-year-old boy turns out to be the son of Lynndie England, who has grown up. And what I found was that by picking out this random word from the dictionary, I ended up creating a character who could not tell the difference between hot and cold, right? Which ended up being one of the central metaphors for the play, which was that this character couldn't distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, and in some ways neither could his parents because of the situation. It was this beautiful coincidence. I had to sort of imbue the word and give the word power in the play, but just by picking out a word that I randomly had to write to, and assigning that to a character, I ended up creating a personality and a characteristic of my main character that really brought me through a whole play. So I think sometimes we sit down to write big plays about big ideas, and it's very hard to write a play about big ideas when you don't really know what the small world is, what the micro-world is—how do the characters speak, how do they talk, how do they breathe, how do they eat, who do they love, etc.? I also then have to start to kind of fold in elements of my own life. I have a very close relationship with an aunt, so I created a very close relationship for this boy with his aunt so that he didn't have to deal with his parents as much, who were tricky people. And my knowledge of his relationship to his aunt was my relationship with my aunt, so I felt comfortable writing him. So I don't think that you necessarily always need to write what you know, I just think you need to make the world of the play something that you know—so draw the line between yourself and this world that is very far outside of yourself.

[Text on screen] Character and Community through Dialogue Choices: RITU COMES HOME by Peter Gilsheredin.

So I have this play called RITU COMES HOME, which I wrote on a commission from InterAct Theatre in Philadelphia. And basically the idea of the commission is that it's... this particular commission is that you're meant to sort of allow worlds that would normally not collide, to collide in a play. So a couple years before I was in Minneapolis at a friend's house and they had a photograph of a young girl on their refrigerator, and they were her sponsors—you know, like send 25-cents a day, Sally Struthers... you know, this kind of thing where you send in money on a daily basis to help children, to feed the children. So I was with my friends in this beautiful Minneapolis house, we were drinking and carrying on, and I was like, "You guys, what would you do if she showed up here in the morning and was like, 'Dad?' What would you actually do?" And so we were laughing, carrying on, thinking about how that would be. How they would react if she turned up and actually asked them to actually take care of her. And so the next day I thought, Oh, that's a play, I want to write that actually. What happens when we feel that we're being charitable, what's sort of the next level of that charity? And how do we deal with it when we're inconvenienced?

So I began to create this play RITU COMES HOME, and the idea was that there was this young woman from Bangladesh who was a teenager, who came to their home—I moved the play to Philadelphia so that my friends wouldn't know it was them, though they knew it was them, totally—but the idea was that they would go to bed one night, when they woke up in the morning, she will have emerged from the suitcase that they had in the middle of the living room—they were going on a vacation, and this suitcase is set up in the middle of the room, and while they're asleep, she comes out of the suitcase. I had a really easy time writing the two gay men, and I had a really easy time writing their best friend, Yesenia, because I was those characters—I knew those characters, I felt those characters. But then I had to write this fourth character of Ritu, who is a fifteen-year-old Bangladeshi teenager who is essentially a refugee. How do I write that in a way that makes good drama? How do I write it in a way that is true to experience of a fifteen-year-old Bangladeshi girl? How do I not write a character who is sort of a paper-doll, heroic, flattened character that doesn't actually do anything? How do I avoid that? And how do I get her to speak without creating an accent that is somehow sort of mocking an accent? It's a scary thing to have to do that when you are not of that group, right? I would have a much easier time writing a gay guy who speaks a certain way, or a Latina character who speaks a certain way, because I am those things, right? But not this character. So I was terrified of her. And she was the character that in every draft radically changed.

One of the things that I had to deal with was that she was bilingual—she spoke some English, and she spoke Bangla because she's from Bangladesh. So the way that I dealt with it in the play was that when she spoke English, she spoke in broken English and she struggled to find her words; but when she spoke in Bangla, she still spoke in English because I was conscious of the fact that the audience was going to be English-speaking, and also I don't speak Bangla and I don't even know how to write it down, so I had her speak perfect English, showing she was speaking in Bangla. At the end of the play, also, another character comes from Bangladesh to get her, and I wanted them to be able to argue with each other, scream at each other and fight with full clarity. So I wanted them to be able to argue in my best English. So this device kind of allowed me to do that.

[Text on screen] Creating Round Characters' Identity through Action and Dialogue.

Creating the character was a process. I had to make a lot of mistakes, I had to take some risks, I had to work with actors who were either Indian or Bangladeshi and say, "Tell me where you're liking it, tell me where it's weird, tell me where you're going, 'Oh, Peter, no!'" I needed that feedback, I had to be brave in getting that feedback, and had to continuously ask myself if I was creating a character through her actions and through her dialogue that was true, and that was also a good, exciting, dramatic character, and not just a prop. And you have to do this as a writer, because otherwise all you can do is write solo shows about yourself. You have to take the risk and write someone who's different from you. It's a kind of risk, that's what it is, otherwise it's just you.