

WATFORD WRITERS
WRITING A SHORT PLAY WORKSHOP 1
Chris McDermott
16.11.2020

**ONE - GETTING STARTED: CONCEPT AND THEME; PLOT AND STRUCTURE;
BEING KIND TO THE DIRECTOR; AUDIENCE IMPACT.**

PART ONE - GETTING STARTED.

- ▶ Today we shall look at issues such as:
 - Concept and Theme (Discussion 1)
 - Plot and Structure (Discussion 2)
 - Being kind to the director
 - Audience impact (Discussion 3)
- ▶ In the second session we shall:
 - Share ideas and scripts that were produced as a result of the first session
 - Examine character
 - Examine dialogue

CONCEPT AND THEME - Rick Harvey: 'Concept is king.'

Theme holds everything together; it is the unifying element.

- **Some examples:**
- **Personal circumstances** - The relationship between my parents as I was growing up - how far did they get along and how far were they poorly matched? Were they aware of this or not? Was there an underlying tension or not?
- **Conventional morality** - The attitude towards gender and children born out of wedlock at the time. How does the story, which is about an individual and her family, epitomise contemporary attitudes?
- **Blindness** - what do we mean by 'emotional blindness' and what are the consequences for an individual? Which is more serious, emotional blindness or physical blindness?

DISCUSSION 1: CONCEPT AND THEME.

- ▶ What type of play are you trying to write?
- ▶ What are the underlying concepts and ideas?
- ▶ Do you have a message or are you wanting simply to pose questions?
- ▶ Is your play purely about entertainment?
- ▶ Is your play 'realistic' or is it absurd?

PLOT AND STRUCTURE- SOME TIPS, COMPARING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A 10-MINUTE PLAY WITH A LONGER PLAY.

- ▶ Keep the structure simple; deal with one issue/theme rather than a number.
- ▶ Keep the number of characters down to a minimum.
- ▶ Brevity: information needs to be communicated as quickly as possible to the audience in terms of the characters, their relationship, the situation and any problems.
- ▶ Keep to one setting.
- ▶ Do not move from one time to another.
- ▶ Consider the use of a narrator to help move the plot along quickly and give a commentary.
- ▶ There will no time for a 'character arc' i.e. a the internal journey a character makes over the course of a narrative. There is time, however, for a revelation or epiphany.

Some of Chris McDermott's Plays.

- ▶ Some examples of plays I have written and directed.
- ▶ What inspired their creation?
- ▶ What techniques did I use?
- ▶ What response did I want from the audience?

DISCOVERY IN A BATHTUB - a comedic play which claims to expose Archimedes as not being the person that we have always believed him to be!



COMING HOME TO SAT NAV - a comedic look at the relationship between a man and a woman which has a surreal element.



COMING HOME TO SAT NAV
7.30pm. Friday, 29th and Saturday, 30th January
2016.

Short and Sweet Drama Festival.
The Junction Theatre, Dubai.

Written and directed by Chris McDermott.
Starring: Chris D'Cotta, Hazel Lucas and Pragya Jain.

BLIND - a serious piece designed to ask the audience to think: what is more serious, to be physically blind or to be emotionally blind? (Technical note: use of narrators)



Blind
WRITTEN &
DIRECTED BY
Chris McDermott

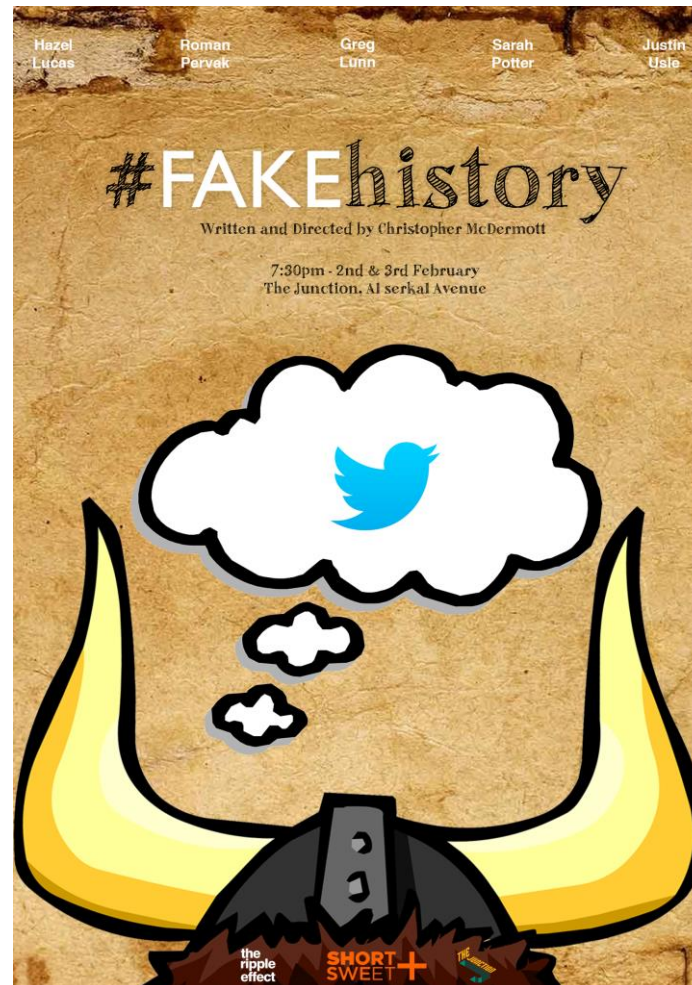
CAST
Hiba Khan
Dima Al Sadi
Maria Gregoric
Jojo Jose
Anna Z. Alexandra

TOP 40 WEEK 4
Friday, February 24, 2017
Showing twice at 15.00 and 20.00

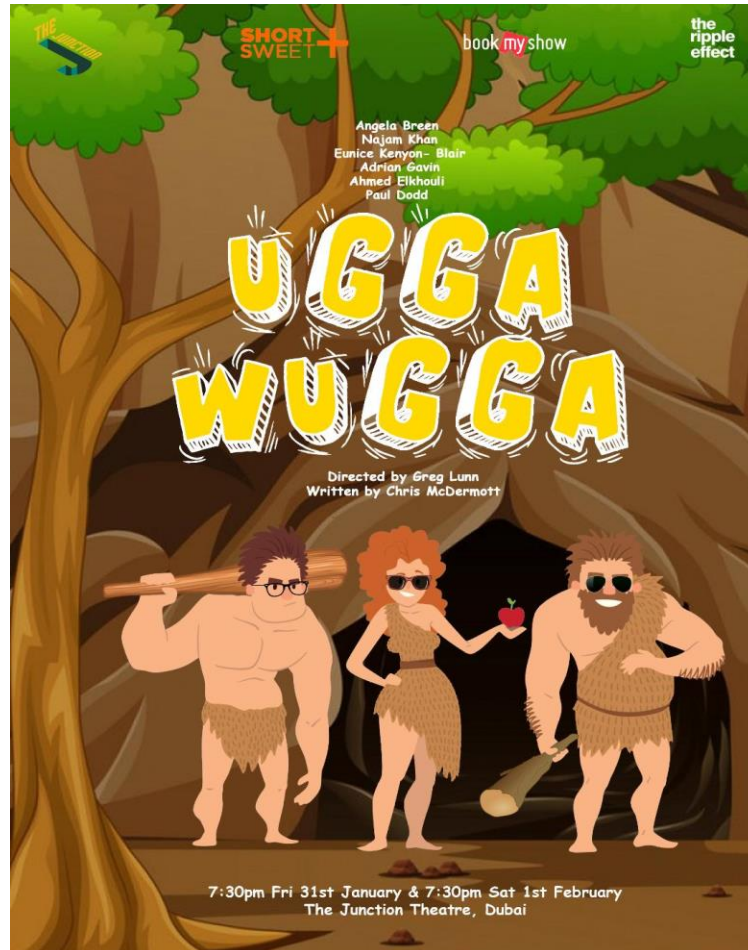
THE JUNCTION
Al Serkal Avenue, Al Quoz, Dubai

THE JUNCTION
SHORT SWEET THEATRE

FAKE HISTORY - a comedic take which adapts the concept of 'FAKE NEWS' and applies it to a modern version of history in which the Vikings are peaceful people, fearful of the frightening tree-huggers. (Technical note: use of narrators).



UGGA WUGGA: a comedic look at the development of the English language until it reached its zenith with Shakespeare. But what has happened since then? (Technical note: use of a narrator)



DISCUSSION 2: PLOT AND STRUCTURE

- Do you have the outline of a story you would like to tell?
- Which characters will it involve? What is their relationship? Is it personal or professional?
- Why are they having this conversation?
- Is the fourth wall broken?
- How does the play reach a resolution?
- What impact do you want to have on the audience?
- Viktor Schoklovsky, the Russian literary theorist, said that ‘Plot is a violation.’ - be mean to the audience. Do we agree?

THE WRITING PROCESS - where do I begin and where do I end?

- ▶ Start with your main idea.
- ▶ Give yourself time to reflect and let your imagination wander.
- ▶ Chat to others who would be happy to do so. You can use them as a ‘sounding boards’ as well as sources of ideas.
- ▶ Always carry a little note book/phone with you so that you can jot down ideas.
- ▶ Once you have your main ideas, sketch out a plan.
- ▶ Once you have your plan, get writing. The most important thing is to get that first draft done - once you have done that you can re-draft in order to improve and get the timing right. Get someone to proofread for you.
- ▶ Reading the script out aloud is always a good way to examine what you have written.

SETTING YOUR PLAY OUT - be kind to the director (1).

- ▶ **CHARACTERS:** Give a list of characters at the beginning, indicating their roles; you can also indicate their characteristics if you feel this is appropriate.
- ▶ **PROPS:** Go through your play and gather together a list of props which will go at the beginning.
- ▶ **SOUND EFFECTS:** It is always useful to have a list of sound effects and any back projections at the beginning.
- ▶ **MISE-EN-SCENE** Stage design. Where are the actors in stage at any particular time? What is the setting in which the play happens? Be clear in terms of outlining the set. A diagram outlining the set, together with exits and entrances Stage Right and Stage Left, is helpful. Where do Stage Right and Stage Left take us to? Will the character come back on the same way?!

MAKE YOUR SCRIPT AS EXPLICIT AS YOU CAN - be kind to the director (2).

- ▶ **EXITS AND ENTRANCES:** Be clear on your set and entrances and exits e.g. Stage Right, Stage Left. You should be clear as to what is Stage Left e.g. the street and what is Stage Right e.g. the rest of the house and the stairs. If this is significant, it should be communicated to the audience at some stage; otherwise, leave this information out.
- ▶ **TECHNICAL ISSUES:** LX for Lighting and SFX for sound. You can light one part of the stage in order to reduce the amount of movement. Sound can be used, for example, to add comedy. Does the lighting suit the style of the play? Are you using SFX for humorous effect?
- ▶ **GUIDANCE FOR THE ACTORS:** How explicit do you want to be in terms of the way a character delivers a line? Do not forget that, in reality, we convey a great deal about ourselves by the manner in which we speak and our body language, as well as by the words we actually utter. Does the character break the fourth wall?

AUDIENCE IMPACT - DISCUSSION 3.

- ▶ In any work of art, the author, director and actors must have a clear idea of what they are trying to achieve in terms the audience's reaction.
- ▶ Can you think of some audience reactions you might want to achieve?
- ▶ How far are you going to help the audience, metaphorically holding their hands?

AUDIENCE IMPACT - WHAT IMPACT DO YOU WANT TO HAVE ON YOUR AUDIENCE?

- ▶ In any work of art, the author, director and actors must have a clear idea of what they are trying to achieve in terms the audience's reaction. For example, do you want to:
- ▶ Make the audience laugh;
- ▶ Make the audience cry;
- ▶ Make the audience think about an important issue;
- ▶ Hold the audience in suspense, so that there is a twist at the end;
- ▶ Stimulate the audience's imagination by taking them into an imaginary, sometimes absurd, world;
- ▶ Make the audience hold their breath and go 'Wow!'
- ▶ How much are we going to help the audience, metaphorically holding their hands? The implicit and the explicit.
- ▶ The end of the play - how will the play end? Will there be, for example, a resolution, an open question, a shock/twist, a denouement or a happy ending? The ending will be written according to the impact you want to have on your audience.

SEPARATED (1) - 24 hour play-writing competition. Prompts given by the organisers: kindergarten teacher, one of twins, exploring, recognition.

- ▶ **Characters:**
- ▶ Patrick the journalist who goes exploring the Arctic with his partner, Samantha. He recognises his non-identical twin brother after prompting.
- ▶ Sean, his non-identical long-lost twin brother, who explores the shared past he has with Patrick. He recognises his brother so that he is able to track him down.
- ▶ Samantha, Patrick's partner.
- ▶ A recorded voice.

SEPARATED(2) - the start of the script.

- ▶ A man walks on to the stage, shivering with cold. He is dressed in a coat and scarf. He talks to himself and looks around to survey the scene.
- ▶ SFX 1: a howling wind.
- ▶ **Patrick:** It was her idea, not mine. The lovely Samantha, my partner. But who else would have come up with a plan to re-ignite our relationship by taking a short break at the North Pole? 'Let's do something different,' she said, and then she cocked her head to one side, fluttered her eyelashes at me, and for some stupid reason, I said, 'Sounds like a great idea!'
- ▶ Turns as if to address the audience.
- ▶ So here I am. At the North Pole! Of course, I managed to get lost or 'separated from the party' as our great tour guide told us we mustn't do. **(He puts on a whiny voice)** 'And don't go playing with the polar bears. They can be very dangerous.' **(Sarcastically)** Really? I never would have guessed? Of course, there's nothing more I would like than having a 'play wrestle' with a polar bear! **(Shakes his head)** What an idiot! **(Continues on his rant)** Of course, it was his fault I got lost! Who in their right mind would lead his party across snowy wastes, waving a *white* flag?! I ask you?! Of course, I needed to stop for a comfort break, and, the next thing you know, the rest of them had gone on without me! **(Pauses, looking around)** I haven't been surrounded by so much snow since Sean, my non-identical twin brother, and I, used to mess around in the snow, all those years ago. **(Pauses)** That was all before they all started to blame me for what happened, of course..... **(Patrick looks down again).**
- ▶ SFX 2: a howling wind.
- ▶ Sean (A voice from offstage comes through the P.A. system): Hello.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

- ▶ Mimesis (Show), not Diegesis (Tell)
- ▶ Hamlet delivers a soliloquy in which he expresses his innermost thoughts. Frankie Howerd, as Lurcio in *Up Pompeii* speaks directly to the camera - he breaks 'the fourth wall.' Why do the authors write in this way? Do we believe the characters? The concept of the unreliable narrator.
- ▶ Simple plot devices - finding a message on someone's mobile phone.
- ▶ Someone overhearing someone else, but the audience can see.
- ▶ A character recalling an event that has taken place previously.

REFLECTION TIME

- ▶ What have you learnt?
- ▶ What do you still need to learn?
- ▶ What are you committing yourself to in terms of the next session?
- ▶ Would you like to work with someone else?

The background features abstract, overlapping geometric shapes in various shades of green, ranging from light lime to dark forest green. These shapes are primarily located on the right side of the frame, creating a modern, layered effect. The rest of the background is plain white.

▶ Thank you!