

**Their brains on paper –
mentoring nine young playwrights in writing, watching and hearing
By John McCarthy**



The nine young playwrights – image copyright Jed Niezgoda 2018

From January to June this year nine young playwrights came together in Graffiti Theatre in Cork and created a short play each, which was then staged before a packed audience in the Everyman Theatre, as part of Cork Midsummer Festival.

The process swept many people along in its gathering momentum; nine young people from Cork city, county and further afield, two playwrights (Katie Holly and myself), three directors and the cast of ‘Asking For It’, by Landmark Productions. The whole programme was Co-ordinate by Fighting Words at Graffiti and funded by an Arts Council Open Call Award.

I was one of two mentors on this programme. My role was to help select the playwrights, guide them through a process of workshops and script drafting, and work with them to produce a completely finished short play at the end.

The process made me think about writing, and how formative the years are when you’re not sure at all what you’re doing. How fruitful that ignorance is; how the grooves that you fall into shape the writer you’ll become afterwards; and how endorsements by outsiders in those early years are crucial.

The Young Playwrights Programme also made me look back at my formative years as a writer in a new way. I’d thought of that young writer me as naive and pretty clueless. But, shaken up by how incredibly ready these nine young writers were back in January — the phrase ‘humiliatingly good’ comes to mind — I remembered how much I’d already absorbed when I was their age; we like to think of writing as involving

many hard-to-acquire skills and experiences before it's really happening, but working with this group of young people was more about allowing an inner writer out, rather than trying to shape them externally.

I've always written, even though I didn't think of it as writing for a long time. I thought of it as playing, when I was small, making worlds and situations in what was basically prolonged day-dreaming; I thought of it as thinking up words that rhymed, or words that I could say with accents that made me laugh, or made my sisters or parents laugh. I thought of it as homework, the essay the teacher would give on a Friday that would occupy most of my mental space that weekend, that I'd hope might be read out in front of my class. Increasingly, in my teenage years, it was what I did in order to be involved in plays. I'd work out comedic sketches with friends at school, then college, and they might never be written down at all, we'd just say them with costumes on and standing on a stage, but that was writing; it was timing, hooking an audience in, investing in character and pace, set pieces and situations.

At University College Cork I met other people who thought like this. Some of us formed a company that made plays in spaces that weren't theatres. That company got a name, Hammergrin, but we all kind of did everything, from writing to performing in the pieces we made up, to building the set. For me, and probably for them too, it was just a version of the same making up that had been done for years. The jokes couldn't be so obvious (most of the time), the characters needed to say more than they used to and they couldn't use accents.

This word 'plot' got bandied about, and while I couldn't really articulate what it meant I had an intrinsic understanding of what it looked like when it arrived. It was an instinct or a sense acquired over years, absorbed from being on stage, from sitting in classrooms hearing words other people wrote, from devouring books and films and TV. Without ever having been explicitly directed to, I'd become really aware of ways to test, stretch and reward an audience.

Even then, I didn't think of myself as a writer. I co-wrote those Hammergrin plays, including an Irish Theatre Best Production nominated piece called 'Hollander'. We were writers, all of us, I know now; we worked out the story, the scenes, the sentences that got said by the actors. But because those actors were myself and my friends and because the story was dreamt up in the same places we'd just hang out in it seemed a stretch to call that business anything other than 'making a play'.

Now I call myself a writer and a big part of me works in the same dynamic from that time. I'm still someone making a play, with whatever tools or wit necessary to do that. The words are really only a small part of being a writer. The playing, the day-dreaming, the funny voices that become rounded whole characters, the knot in the imagination that wants to tighten, that's the real work of a writer.

I think it's important to claim that name 'Writer', and then be responsible for your writing. During the six months Katie and I worked with the young playwrights we talked regularly about effectively coming out as a writer to family, friends, peers. It wasn't a requirement of the programme by any means, but it helps to underpin these achievements for future work.

It doesn't mean a young writer shouldn't at the same time be immersing themselves in all the creative opportunities outside of strict writing. Theatre is at its essence collaborative; no playwright exists in isolation. The greatest play in the world goes unheard, unseen, without the investment and talent of many other people. A writer needs to be able to speak that language too and be part of a wide vibrant network around creating work for and with audiences.



Performance at The Everyman Theatre, Cork - image copyright Jed Niezgoda 2018

Our nine young people supported each other brilliantly despite the individual nature of their tasks. They worked the equivalent of different streets and cities but all on the same map; they knew the others were going through the same thing, and their ups and downs balanced out across the group; their enthusiasm buoyed up the disheartened writer on their off-day, their well-performed line of another person's script saved a section that might otherwise have been lost. This collective buzz of minds and hearts creating carried us all along, far beyond where we realistically hoped we'd be when we set out.

One more thing I noticed as the year went on: the young people know that writing one play doesn't mean they suddenly know how to write any amount they like in the future. All of them wanted to start to embed practices and habits in their lives that ensure they're as likely as possible to do that. That's the best approach I think. Each play writes itself through you in a new way, but you have to be around enough and adaptable enough to let it.

The emerging practices and habits of the nine writers will go on evolving and being tailored individually. But certainly this year reinforced for me that there isn't a way to write a play that doesn't involve fully imagining every moment of it at some point or other along the way. Writing a play can't be faked; you have to struggle over the next line, or the last line, you have to feel at least once in the drafting that the whole thing might actually be a terrible mistake, you have to ripple a little in the buzz of hearing the words read aloud the first time, and shrink when they're read wrong or they don't land with the audience. You have to fear that you've put too much of yourself in, love a character or speech you then have to cut, reach for a notebook when the rest of the world continues on by — all these tiny epiphanies endure long after the actors that said the lines in your first play have left the stage.

Completing and realising are big parts of what these young people did. They strode boldly into half a year of blank pages, dropping crumbs of words and character as they went, trusting that an audience would ultimately follow them, and more importantly, trusting themselves to make sense of it all at the end.

These tiny epiphanies take skill and bravery for the individual. We did focus all along on process rather than output; and I'm sure that in the end— even though the nine plays are genuinely remarkable pieces of work — it's the experience of writing them that will stand to these young writers for the rest of their lives.

John is a playwright and actor who lives in Cork. He is currently the Theatre Artist in Residence at Cork Opera House and University College Cork. Finished Once, and Ready, directed by Caitríona McLaughlin, was performed in recent showings in Cork (School of Music) and Dublin (Irish Theatre Institute) in development (Arts Council project). John wrote Stage Irish, which won the Writers Guild of Great Britain Playwrights Progress Award 2014 and was shortlisted for the Papatango New Playwriting Prize 2014 and co-wrote Hollander, nominated Best Production at Irish Theatre Awards 2010.

As an actor John recently appeared in The Lonesome West (Everyman), Blackwater Babble (BrokenCrow), Bluetooth (Everyman) and The Gardener (Graffiti). Film and television work includes The School (RTE, 2017) Point of Departure and Private Report (both Maximilian Le Cain).

John is co-director of Hammergrin, appearing in serialised sci-fi podcast In Darkness Vast among many others. In 2018 he was a recipient of an Arts Council Theatre Bursary for playwriting, a mentor on the Young Playwrights Programme and awarded a Documentation Bursary from Arts in Education. He was also selected for the Next Stage programme at the Dublin Theatre Festival 2017.



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