



## **37 Plays Resource Pack 2: Building the World**

### **About 37 Plays**

37 Plays is a new, nationwide playwriting project led by the RSC and their 12 theatre partners across the country. Its aim is to get the nation writing. We are inviting children, young people and adults, including established, emerging and first-time writers, to write the new comedies, tragedies, and untold histories of our time.

### **About This Pack**

This resource is designed as a follow up to Pack 1: Finding Your Story, a first step for anyone who has never written a play before. It contains specific activities to support our film 'Building the World' by playwright Ishy Din. After watching his film, you can take your pick of these and other practical activities to help develop your story further by building and developing the World in which it's set.

All the activities can be done individually but some are designed to include a fellow writer or willing helper should you wish. As any playwright will tell you, there is no set way of writing a play and this pack includes tips, hints and ideas from existing playwrights to get you started and support you along the way...

*"The world that you build impacts on the play. What is going on outside of what we can see?"*

- Ishy Din, Playwright

A story can be changed dramatically by the world in which it's set. In this short film Ishy Din talks about the power that a playwright has to choose and to change the world of their story. You may wish to take notes as you watch but the activities to follow are linked to the ideas that he explores.

### **In the film**

Ishy concentrates on finding a location for your world by asking the following factual questions:

- Is it a real or imaginary world?
- What time of year is it and what is the timeframe of the story?
- Is it a contemporary setting?
- What's going on in the larger world?

The following activities are designed to help explore those questions...

## **Activity 1: The Literal World**

“Don’t restrict yourself. Just throw it in there, see what happens. It’s not like cooking in that sense, that once you’ve added it you can’t take it back out.”

- Ishy Din, Playwright

The following activity (in 3 parts) is designed to help you make literal, factual decisions to build a world that not only suits your story but makes that story more interesting or adds more drama, comedy or intrigue.

### **A. What if?** (You will need: pens and paper, recording device with playback facility)

This activity is designed to challenge ideas you may already have and to think outside the box. You can do this activity alone or involve a fellow writer or willing helper.

- [Watch the film by playwright Ishy Din](#) in which he shares his thoughts on where to set a story and what decisions might affect this world and write down as many questions as you can from his suggestions.
- Now spend **2 minutes** telling your story to an imaginary (or real) listener. It might help to give them an imagined role: *potential audience member, work colleague, West End producer...*
- You now have **10 minutes** to ask yourself (or be asked) as many of Ishy’s questions as possible. It may help to record this section, especially if you are working alone. Each time you answer a question, you (or your listener) must then ask “What if...” and suggest at least **two** alternatives. The aim is to make these alternatives helpful but challenging, eg:
  - **Where** is your story set? What part of the world? Inside or outside? **What if** it was set in a different country? Or inside a prison?
  - **When** is it set? **What if** it was set in the past? Or in the middle of the night? Or over ten years?
  - **What** is happening in the World that might affect their story? **What if** there was an invasion or a war going on? Or a big sporting event? Or an environmental disaster?
  - **What** specific locations will you need? A prison or courtroom? **What if** it was set in a school? Or during a family wedding?
- When the time is up, jot down any answers or suggestions that interested you, using the recorded session to jog your memory. *Have you changed your minds about any decisions? How will these changes help your story? What suggestions will you NOT choose and why? How does it feel to make changes like this? Liberating? Challenging?*

### **Shakespeare’s world building**

Sometimes a theatre can feel more restrictive than film or TV but Shakespeare managed to set his plays in a wide range of locations, including:

- A heath in Scotland
- A magical island

- A battlefield
- Venice (despite never having been there)

In fact it is thought that Shakespeare never left England and yet his plays are set all over the globe. With limited special effects or scenery, he used his language to transport his audience to these places, often telling them directly where they were in a prologue.

**B) Moodboards** (You will need: large pieces of paper, pens, scrapbook, glue or sticky tape or tablet with collage app)

Writers take their inspiration from all sorts of places. American author Tracy Chevalier was inspired by a Dutch painting of an unknown girl wearing a pearl earring. Intrigued by the girl and why she wore the earring, she invented a story about her called *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, a bestselling book which became a feature film starring Scarlett Johansson.

Moodboards are a way of collecting this inspiration in one place and are used extensively by many creative people, including designers, artists and writers to awaken their senses and enrich their work; in this case, your story.

- Research the idea of moodboards on the internet or using your local library and see the range of options there are. Decide how you would like to create your moodboard. What would help you best? *Large pieces of paper on the wall? A scrapbook filled with ideas? A collage on your tablet using an app?*
- Start creating a moodboard for the World of your play. Try and take your inspiration from varying places in many forms: cuttings, photographs, drawings, fabric. If your story is set locally, take a walk with your camera, take or draw pictures and make notes of what you can hear and feel. If not, can you visit it or look it up online? If it's an imaginary place, what is it most like or what comes to mind when you think of it? What can you find around you to suggest these things, however abstract?
- Imagine you are with another person (potential audience member or fellow writer, etc.) and talk through your moodboard. Record this session if you are working alone or invite questions about this World. Reflect on your recordings or notes afterwards: *Did you come up with any details during your description or Q&A session that you hadn't planned? Will you now include these details in your World?*
- Keep your moodboard active throughout your writing process and update it, adding to your sensory information or removing details if they are no longer relevant.

*“Each answer will then elicit another set of questions but each answer will also be another brick in the construction but over a period of time. Don't stress it, don't think, 'I have to come up with everything in one go,' just start building the bricks; the world's your oyster”*

- Ishy Din, Playwright

**C) Soundscaping** (You will need: pens, paper, access to a tablet with internet access, a recording device with playback facility)

Writing isn't always about writing. Many writers like to immerse themselves in a subject before even picking up a pen. The following activity introduces a different way of exploring the senses to create your potential World.

- Think about what you understand by a soundscape. *How different is a soundscape to a soundtrack? Why might a soundscape be useful to a writer?*
- Spend five minutes thinking about your story and make a list of possible sounds that could be heard in this World. Consider the following: *Is your story set in the city or countryside? Is it set in the future or the past? What is immediately outside or in the next room?*
- Spend time finding (or creating) all the sounds or sound effects on your list and record them as a 'soundscape' - a journey of noise and sound that creates an atmosphere for your world. You could search for sounds on the internet or even borrow effects or soundtracks from TV, radio or film.
- Sit or lie down and close your eyes and listen to your soundscape. You may like to have a pen and paper in hand to scribble any thoughts down. If you prefer, you could play the soundscape to a fellow writer or willing helper and invite feedback: *How did this particular world make them feel? What kind of person might live in this world? What type of story might they expect to have this atmosphere - a drama? A comedy?*
- Consider your notes or feedback. *Was it what you expected? Did your listener experience the same World that you imagined? What could you have done differently? How might you help the audience experience your world better?*

## **A Writer's Process**

Every writer has their own way of writing; this is often referred to as their 'process'. Every writer's process is unique to them. The best thing to do is to try lots of different ways of writing in order to find what works best for you.

Tips from our writers:

- "What time of the day do you think most clearly? We're all productive at different times."
- "Facing the empty page is daunting. Processing things is also valid time."
- "Get rid of distractions, delete apps on your phone."

## **Activity 2: The Social World**

*"What is going on outside of what we can see? And how is that affecting what is going on? Is it the Platinum Jubilee and is everyone in a good mood? And if everyone is in a good mood, what are you going to do to spoil it? ...Your job as a creator or writer is to sort of shake the World up. If it's all in a straight line, it's boring."*

- Ishy Din, Playwright

You can spot social themes 'trending' on TV or in theatres all the time, particularly in soap operas that are written to reflect our daily lives. Think of just how many 'pandemic' stories there have been recently. Mobile phones changed TV and film forever: writers struggle to get their characters in 'no signal areas' just so the story doesn't end with: 'he dialed 999 and it was all sorted.'

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* as a response to James I's obsession with witches. He wasn't just being 'topical' of course - he wrote for money - but if you can nail a social influence successfully, your play might just last as long as his.

This next activity (in 2 parts) gets us thinking more abstractly about the world outside our World. What's going on SOCIALLY that might have an impact on our play? (We will look at political context in the next section although these two are obviously connected and you may wish to connect these ideas in these activities.)

## A) Switching Scenes

This activity uses one simple scenario to help you explore the wider social context and how it affects the inner World of your play.

- Leaving your own story to one side for the moment, take no longer than **5 minutes** to write a simple dialogue to create the following mini-scene. (Try not to judge yourself, worry about character or plot or even write for an audience at this stage, just set a timer and get it on the page)
  - Person A is alone, engaged in an activity
  - Person B enters and proposes marriage
  - Person A either accepts or not
- Once you have your mini-scene written, imagine that it's taking place in one of the following social circumstances and rewrite it to match that environment. Things to think about in particular: *What A is doing when B enters? Is the scene public or private? How does the scene affect other people?*
  - A pub during a match
  - The visiting room of a prison
  - A busy hospital
  - After an environmental disaster with the last 2 people on earth.
- Compare both versions of your mini-scene. How has the change of social environment affected: *both characters? Your choice of dialogue? Stage directions? The tone of the scene - has it become a comedy or far more serious? Has the ending changed - has A said 'no'?*
- Try the activity again with another change of scene. Or you may like to add a social circumstance of your own invention and try that. Again, take note of how your characters behave in this new circumstance. *Are the differences huge or subtle? How might you make an audience aware of these social circumstances other than through dialogue?*
- Now go back to your play idea. Take some time to consider the story and the world you've chosen for it. *Are there any choices you can make about the social world outside that might make similar changes to your scenes? What could be happening to add comedy to your play or bring a dramatic, even tragic, element into it?*

## Context

In the film *When Harry Met Sally*, Billy Crystal's character is trying to have a serious talk about his marriage with his best friend. However, they are at a baseball game where a constant Mexican wave interrupts their conversation.

### More writers' tips:

- "The wrong place is often the right place."
- "Juxtaposing situation and circumstance can often make for great drama or comedy."
- "Start with a question that you don't know the answer to."
- "An audience enjoys and engages with characters struggling. No one wants to see things going smoothly"

## B) Interviews

*"I grew up in Redcar. It always reminds me of crying on the waltzers for some reason but the ice cream, the smell of fish and chips... I use that to evoke memories of a place. Obviously I don't know what it must be like to wander into an enchanted forest but I can imagine what I want it to be like..."*

- Ishy Din, Playwright

Many playwrights connect with other people during their research to get a feel of how those people live their lives and feel about certain issues or subjects. This is a valuable way of widening your existing worldview and finding an authentic way of writing about an unfamiliar world.

The following activity involves talking with someone about a subject they know. (If you choose something personal, make sure they (and you) are comfortable about addressing it in this way.)

- Think about the people that you know. Make a list of anyone you think has particular knowledge of, or experience in, something unfamiliar to you. It can be anything, such as: *A grandparent who fought in a war. Someone who lost a job recently or started a new business. A friend who lived or lives abroad. Someone who can cook a meal or play an instrument you can't.*
- Imagine you are this person and spend **ten minutes** writing a short speech, in the first person, about this subject. Imagine you are telling someone else about it and try to describe the sensory experience - *what did you see, smell, hear, feel?*
- Now ask the person you know to talk to you about this experience for **five minutes**. You can take notes or record the conversation if they are comfortable with this. Prompt them with questions if needed (or appropriate) such as: *Where were you? What do you remember seeing? Can you remember any other sensory experiences? How did you feel before and after this experience?*
- Now spend **10 minutes** altering your speech to include all the information and details you have been told. Use your notes or recording if necessary. This is not a case of turning their comments 'word for word' into a speech but rather rewriting your speech using the additional firsthand knowledge that you now have.

- Compare the two speeches. If you have a willing colleague or fellow writer, maybe read the two speeches out loud to them and compare the differences: *How does your imagined speech stand up to the lived experience? Are there any details in particular that help create the world of the experience to an audience? How can you create or replicate details like this for yourself in future?*

### **A Writer's Process**

It's so easy to get distracted, especially in our world today with mobile devices, social media and instant news. How do we keep focus when working on an idea? Do we schedule writing time into our lives or stop everything when an idea hits? Some tips from our writers...

- "Keep a notebook by the bed. Take one with you everywhere, even when you go swimming."
- "Write solidly for 20 minutes, then take 10 minutes off."
- "Force yourself to write for an hour, write anything. Call it the WRITING HOUR."
- "The answer is - try everything. If it works for you, do it."

### **Activity 3: The Political World**

Playwrights through the ages have used the theatre to explore the political World: Juliet Gilkes Romero's play *The Whip* examines the fight to pass the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act whereas *Value Engineering: Scenes From the Grenfell Enquiry*, edited by Richard Norton-Taylor, uses verbatim theatre to create a powerful allegory of British society, and 400 years ago, Shakespeare used *Julius Caesar* to comment on the pros and cons of republicanism and monarchy in Elizabethan England.

This next activity is in two parts. Part A explores the individual affected by the political and Part B looks at ways to approach bigger themes in more unusual ways, such as allegory or metaphor.

**A) Confessions** (You will need: pens, paper, newspapers, tablet with internet access, recording device)

"Check out a newspaper feature, a tweet or a social media post that surprises or shocks you. You may see something that excites you or makes your blood boil. I certainly see a lot of things that take my breath away in good ways and bad."

- Juliet Gilkes Romero, Playwright

Sometimes the political world is a very obvious presence in a play; sometimes it is very subtle. This activity is an opportunity to play with this level of subtlety.

- Spend **ten minutes** looking through your preferred news outlet - internet, newspapers, TV, radio - and make a list of current events that come under the political umbrella: *from immigration and Partygate to airport drop off charges*. Try to choose subjects that you have an instant reaction to as you see it, even if it's a groan.
- Choose one subject on your list and spend **two minutes** making a list of characters who could be affected by it, eg. *Rising heating bills could affect: a lonely OAP afraid*

*to put the heating on, a working mum who can't afford to pay them, the rich owner of an energy company.*

- Select one character (Character A) from your list and spend **2 minutes** deciding what they might want or need most in the world and ONE thing they do to try and get it. Make sure you connect these to the topic you've chosen, eg. *The working mum wants to win the lottery. She spends all her wages on lottery tickets.*
- Next, spend **1 minute** to decide on an unexpected result, based on what Character A has done, eg. *She wins the lottery but her landlord steals the ticket...*
- Try to put yourself into the mind of Character A during this unexpected result. It might help to close your eyes and describe what has happened to yourself out loud or write it down.
- Imagine Character A is in one of the following locations and decides to confess what has happened to them to at least one other person (Character B):
  - A broken lift
  - A police station
  - A funeral
  - A garden party
- Spend **5 minutes** writing this confession. You can include lines for Character B if you like.
- When you have finished, look over this speech or scene and see how your political theme or subject has affected what you've written. *Is it there in the emotion of Character A? Or in the responses of Character B? The choices of words that you have used? Could you have chosen a better location for this theme to be present for the audience in some way?*

## **B. Allegory** (You will need: pen, paper or tablet to write)

Some writers choose to put their worlds directly into character or dialogue by creating allegorical plays or plays that exist as metaphors. From Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*, which is set in an imaginary world where every living thing is at war, to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, an enduring allegory of revolution and power.

To further explore the choices you have as a writer, this activity digs deeper into a less literal form of writing.

- Think for a moment about the subject you chose in the last activity - the 'Political theme', if you like. Try to recall why you chose this theme and the emotions or arguments it provoked in you. If it helps, write these down as single words on pieces of paper and stick them up on the wall or scatter them on the floor around you.
- Take some time to re-read the scene you created in the last activity but this time, imagine that Character B is a *personification* of your political theme. For example: What if Character B represented WAR itself? Or FAMINE? Or FORTUNE? (Dickens does this to great effect in *A Christmas Carol*)

- Spend **15 minutes** altering your scene to reflect this. Challenge yourself to see how much or how little you can add to create this change. *Does Character A know who they are?*
- Now alter this scene to add up to **3 references** to your subject: This can be as blatant as adding a stage direction for a big flag to hang centre stage or giving one character a specific role in society, eg. *judge, social worker, teacher, cleaner*. Play around with the choices you have and how they affect the scene.
- If you are working with a writing partner or group, share your versions of the scene and discuss whether your readers (or listeners if you read out loud) can detect your subject or theme and which version they prefer: *Is there a moment when the choices get too overpowering? How much of the world do you need in order to create the best conflict for your characters and the best experience for your audience?*

Further exercises:

- Look up some modern examples of political playwrights and give them a read or go and see them in the theatre if you can (There are a wide variety of these and you'll find most in any library, eg. plays by Winsome Pinnock, Sami Ibrahim, Juliet Gilkes Romero, James Graham, among many others.)
- When you have read or seen a few, consider the following: *What size production does this play need - small and intimate with only a few characters or an elaborate set and full-sized cast? How has the playwright used their main characters to ask the questions or convey the views they want? How are we, the audience, expected to feel and what kind of questions does the play make us ask?*
- Read the following extract from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Act 4 Scene 1, set the night before the English army goes into battle with the French. King Henry, in disguise, visits his soldiers in their camp to speak with them and learn their feelings: *How differently would the other characters speak if they knew Henry was the King? Why has Shakespeare given Henry this choice?*
- If you have time, read the whole play to learn more about the context. Pay particular attention to how Shakespeare creates the 'feel' of Henry's great battles without being able to show them on stage.

## **Henry V, Act 4 Scene 1**

### **WILLIAMS**

We see yonder the beginning of the day, but I think we shall never see the end of it. Who goes there?

### **KING HENRY V**

A friend.

### **WILLIAMS**

Under what captain serve you?

### **KING HENRY V**

Under Sir Thomas Erpingham.

### **WILLIAMS**

A good old commander and a most kind gentleman: I pray you, what thinks he of our estate?

### **KING HENRY V**

Even as men wrecked upon a sand, that look to be washed off the next tide.

### **BATES**

He hath not told his thought to the king?

### **KING HENRY V**

No; nor it is not meet he should. For, though I speak it to you, I think the king is but a man, as I am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me: the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions: his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet, when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing. Therefore when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours are: yet, in reason, no man should possess him with any appearance of fear, lest he, by showing it, should dishearten his army.

### **BATES**

He may show what outward courage he will; but I believe, as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck; and

so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here.

### **KING HENRY V**

By my troth, I will speak my conscience of the king: I think he would not wish himself any where but where he is.

### **BATES**

Then I would he were here alone; so should he be sure to be ransomed, and a many poor men's lives saved.

### **KING HENRY V**

I dare say you love him not so ill, to wish him here alone, howsoever you speak this to feel other men's minds: methinks I could not die any where so contented as in the king's company; his cause being just and his quarrel honourable.

### **WILLIAMS**

That's more than we know.

### **BATES**

Ay, or more than we should seek after; for we know enough, if we know we are the king's subjects: if his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us.

### **WILLIAMS**

But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all 'We died at such a place;' some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afeard there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of any thing, when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it; whom to disobey were against all proportion of subjection.

We'll never know how many drafts of *Henry V* Shakespeare wrote but it's safe to say it was more than one.

### **Writer's Tip**

"Making mistakes, writing things and then starting again, trying things out, rewriting are all part of the process. You're not wasting time - it all has value. You can let yourself think, research, ask questions, dream before you write anything down. Or you can get started right away and let yourself try things. It's all part of writing a play."

### **Further Inspiration**

Below are the names of the playwrights we worked with to create these ideas. Look them up and read their plays. The more you explore other writers' worlds, the more you feed your imagination. At some point, all of these writers (including Shakespeare) had never written a play and didn't know how to begin.

Amy Ng, Bea Roberts, Brad Birch, Chris O'Connell, Isabel Dixon, Ishy Din, Isley Lynn, Juliet Gilkes Romero, Nina Segal, Phil Porter, Rob Drummond, Sami Ibrahim, Jack Holden, Stephanie Dale.