



How did I get here?

Nicola McCartney: Accidental playwright

Nicola McCartney is both an award-winning director and playwright and a foster carer. As a playwright her work includes: *Easy*, *The Hanging Tree* and *Home* (lookOUT); *Cave Dwellers* (7:84 Scotland Theatre Company); *Heritage* (Traverse); *For what we are about to receive* (Brunton Theatre), *Convictions* (Tinderbox), *Underworld* (Frantic Assembly); *Lifeboat* and *Lion of Kabul* (Catherine Wheels); *Standing Wave: Delia Derbyshire in the 60s* for Tron Theatre/ Reeling & Writhing. She has also written extensively for radio and television, and is currently writing for BBC Scotland River City. Nicola has worked as a dramaturge for a range of companies including EGYTS, Vanishing Point, TAG, Theatre Hebrides, Stellar Quines and the Edinburgh International Festival 2005. Nicola has had a range of residencies, most recently for Shetland Arts Trust, and was one of the first Associate Playwrights of the Playwrights' Studio, Scotland. She is currently Creative Writing Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. She was a recipient of a Creative Scotland Award 2003 to work on her first novel. She has worked on Class Act since 1997, both in Scotland and Russia, and wrote a drama documentary for BBC Radio 4, *Beyond The Thundercloud*, about her experiences doing Class Act Caucasus, in 2006. She is currently under commission to Traverse, NTS, National Theatre London, The Abbey Dublin, Tinderbox (Belfast), and is working on the film script of *Heritage* for Brocken Spectre financed by Scottish Screen.

A literaturetraining / Playwrights' Studio Scotland co-commission

Splitting myself

'I'm a poet, I have no idea how to write a play.
So go on – teach me!'

I was trapped in a version of the classic nightmare job interview scenario: a dozen bored academics faced me across the longest table known grilling me for my first Writer-In-Residence post at a university. There was a death-rattle pause as I felt every writer's dream of three years' solid monthly income slipping away.

And then, from somewhere, an answer came to me: 'I would teach you to split yourself.'

I fumbled to explain that when I sit down to write a poem, I write from myself to myself, and when I sit down to write fiction, I split myself in two, to write to one ideal reader, but when I begin to write a play, I develop multiple personality disorder. I am the author creating my vision but I also look at any line of dialogue from the perspective of the audience, the director and also the actor, and then all the different

characters for whom I have to find the impulse to speak in order to create action.

This instinctive answer made perfect natural sense to me and must have to the panel as I got the job. But of course it makes sense to me because splitting myself has been how I have managed to survive in the sea of fortune (or fashion), otherwise known as being a professional playwright. When 'playwright me' has been in danger of sinking, I can find another hand-hold.

This sounds horrifying to young writers with dreams of sustaining themselves by keyboard and Royal Court debut alone. I have been told by many established playwrights that some of the jobs I do – particularly education and community work – profane the priest-like profession of playwright. I won't even begin to write of the hostility with which directors, funding bodies and theatre companies react. But there are many playwrights for whom being multi-faceted isn't just a financial but a creative necessity.

For me, it feeds into my playwriting in giving me a real appreciation of each individual professional's role within the making of theatre, but it also helps me 'split myself' when writing to hopefully achieve within each new script the ideal of it working on multiple levels of meaning. It shapes me as a writer.

However, it has also nearly cost me everything.

The sea of fortune

I have always said that I was an 'accidental' playwright. I didn't set out to become one.

I never once did a writing course but I had always written since I was a young child, and rather oddly, having never seen a play, it was in the dramatic form that I started to write. Coming from my background as the first person to go to university from a working-class Belfast family, I never considered or felt I would be 'allowed' to

become a playwright. My mother insisted I was doing law at Queen's. I ran away to Glasgow University to study Theatre and English.

Here, as a wannabe director, I met John Tiffany (director of the National Theatre of Scotland's award-winning *Blackwatch*). Frustrated by student theatre and its endlessly 'innovative' productions of *The Maids*, we set up lookOUT, a new writing theatre company which went on to be funded by Scottish Arts Council and with whom I wrote and directed new work for ten years.

We wrote to many famous faces who kindly anonymously donated over £1000 to enable us to do our first production at the Edinburgh Festival in 1994. We had little money to commission a playwright, so John and I each wrote and directed a short play as a double bill. My play, *Laundry*, about Magdalene institutions in Ireland, was successful enough to win me commissions from the Traverse Theatre and Glasgow's Mayfest and it all sort of took off from there.

I went on to commissions with the Traverse, the National Theatre and the Abbey (Dublin). I was devising new work with some of the most exciting young theatre companies in the UK such as Frantic Assembly and the newly established Vanishing Point. I picked up these other jobs simply by getting out there and making my own work and taking a real interest in other people's work. Theatre is a community, and I've found that if you become a healthy part of that community, you can thrive.

At this time, I began picking up associate director posts with other companies such as Northern Ireland's Charabanc, Glasgow Citizens and West End producers G&J and I found myself being mentored by, and working with, seriously experienced and talented people to whom I owe my career. I was extremely lucky and owe a lot to very many people. In the early 1990s, I was one of few female playwrights working in Scotland at the time and I was the new young thing so I got a lot of attention. By 2001, I was

simultaneously writing for stage, screen, TV, radio and running a theatre company. I gained a lot of experience in a short space of time in many aspects of the industry.

In fear of drowning

The sea of fortune seemed to be carrying me along on a tide of success. But I was in serious danger and I did not heed the warnings that I was doing way too much. All this early success meant I lived in fear of drowning and so I never stopped 'swimming'. I couldn't – or rather, now I understand, I wouldn't— say no.

Eventually in 2001, I burned out. One day I got up after my usual two hours sleep at 4 am to work on a film project and just couldn't type. For the first time I could not complete my commissions. It was devastating. I had to stop work completely for nearly two years. Eventually, I lost my flat in Glasgow and ended up technically homeless.

The gathering of all that experience which had nearly killed me was also the thing that saved me. It was this which contributed to my winning a Creative Scotland Award to write the first draft of a novel which was the beginning of me getting back fully on my feet again – with much more balance than before because I now know that the time to stop and think and dream is 99% of the work of writing a script. 1% is filling up the white with the black. My work is better now for that I think.

And it all – including the burn out – is what qualifies me to do the other work I principally do alongside being a dramatist: devising and dramaturgy. These opportunities have often been born from me having written for a specific company, or better still, have spawned new commissions for me.

There are two key things I have found in both of these roles which determine how successful I will

be in doing my job – ownership and communication.

Dramaturgy¹

I've worked as a dramaturge for a number of companies such as Edinburgh International Festival, Playwrights' Studio, Scotland, and Vanishing Point. I work as what I call a 'midwife' in helping to birth others' ideas in two principal ways:

- 1) With an individual writer from page to stage
- 2) With a company through a devising process

In both cases, what I am mainly there for is as a craft consultant – giving constructive feedback and advising, when asked, on structure and other elements – although I have also been asked to do more traditional dramaturgical jobs such as helping with research, writing programme notes, and planning a programme.

When actively assisting the creative process, I want to be clear about exactly what the company wants me to do and have this in my contract. Under no circumstances will I be involved in actually writing any text. This is where it becomes very messy indeed and all sorts of legal battles can result from dramaturges seeking rights and royalties. If I am working as a dramaturge, I do not go anywhere near a keyboard. The writer, director or company owns the work. This protects everyone including me.

It's essential to catch the vision of the writer, the company or the director with whom I am working from the outset, and to allow room for that to grow and change as the writing / devising process continues. I find it useful to build in review and discussion points through the process.

The key thing is to ask more questions than to deliver answers. I am not there to be the problem

¹ Excellent advice can be found from the Dramaturgs Network online. The Scottish Society of Playwrights also has best practice guidelines for both companies and writers.

solver. Where appropriate I make suggestions but I am clear that these are free. It is up to the writer / director / actors to take that responsibility as owners of the work. This again protects everyone and the integrity of the work.

Working with writers

I've been privileged to work with emerging writers and with established novelists or poets writing their first work for the stage. I particularly love doing the latter as I always learn so much myself.

With either type of writer, the danger is always to want to rework the writer's vision as my own. However, the fact that I have screwed up so dramatically myself has cured me of the curse of being single-minded about my vision. Also, having been subject to much dramaturgical interference myself, I err on the side of respect. The writer absolutely owns the script.

Another facet of this role is as interpreter. I often find myself doing simultaneous translation between the various different creative 'languages' in a rehearsal room. Directors, actors, designers, technicians and writers see things differently and often communicate their ideas in different ways to each other. Having run a company of my own and done so many different jobs, I am fluent in both directorese and writerese, am competent in actorese and have a smattering of techie.

At other times I have simply been a buffer zone between the various parties to deliver feedback – because I have no ownership over the work I am seen as more impartial – but these have been the most negative experiences.

Working with companies

This is a lot like working with a writer, except that often I am working with a director's vision here, or indeed a company of actors, even a designer

or choreographer. All the same principles apply for me, and especially the total ban on doing any writing. Unfortunately, I have worked with companies who will try to push the responsibility of writing up a script onto me. I resist that at all costs as I have had some character-building, but also very damaging, experiences when this boundary gets blurred.

Devising

Michael Billington once defined the devised play as 'a total mess'. And playwrights themselves often don't see this as real writing.

I love this 'playwriting in 3-D' and in fact once reversed a commission contract to devising with the director after I delivered a first draft and realised they had found a better way to tell the story.

In many ways, this is how I started writing plays, working with my company years ago for the Edinburgh Fringe. All theatre is collaborative but so much of our industry gets bogged down in status and roles and the hegemony of the director. Devising should not be like that. Whereas it is essential that everyone knows what their role is within the process, is clear about it (communication again) and takes responsibility for their bit, I love the fact that this can change as the process develops.

I am often involved in creating a story told through pictures, dance and music, sometimes as well as, but also excluding, text i.e. no words at all. I have found this truly liberating, inspiring and a real boost to my own work as a playwright as it helps me extend my theatrical language.

In my experience, it's good to build in review points to both a contract and a process where writer and company can discuss the process and any changes they wish to make which can then impact upon the contract in terms of fees, rights and royalties.

A life by design

So what started fifteen years ago as an accident has now become a life by design. Having drowned once and come back to life again, I am no longer afraid of disappearing. Now, I just enjoy the work in whatever form it takes – whether I am working by myself for myself or helping birth someone else's vision – because I know now that it all makes me the richer.

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Useful links

BBC writersroom

The BBC's online resource for writing for TV, radio and film featuring writers' guidelines, script archive, advice from writers and other industry experts and free script formatting software.
www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom

The Directors Guild of Great Britain

Supports directing across all media including film, television and theatre. Welcomes professional directors and students of directing and associated studies.
<http://www.dggb.org/>

Dramaturgs Network

An organisation for UK theatre practitioners committed to developing dramaturgy and supporting practitioners development in the field.
<http://ee.dramaturgy.co.uk/index.php/site/front/>

The National Association of Writers in Education Supports the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK. Manages artscape (www.artscape.org.uk) an online national arts in education directory.
www.nawe.co.uk

National Theatre of Scotland

Takes theatre all over the country and beyond, working with existing and new venues, artists and companies to create and tour world class theatre. Accepts script submissions from writers who are Scottish or based in Scotland.
www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/newwork

Pearson Playwrights' Scheme

Awards five bursaries to playwrights annually. Applicants must be sponsored by a theatre which then submits the play for consideration by a panel. Each award allows the playwright a twelve-month attachment. Also awards a prize for the best play of the year to emerge from the previous year's winning writers.
www.pearson.com

Peggy Ramsay Foundation

Awards grants to professionally produced playwrights who need time to write again for the stage.
www.peggyramsayfoundation.org

Playwrights' Studio, Scotland

Range of activities designed to develop the skills and experience of Scotland's playwrights including workshops, mentoring, script-reading and networking events.
www.playwrightsstudio.co.uk

Scottish Arts Council

Part-funds a network of Writing Fellowships across Scotland and supports the creative development of writers through its bursaries for new and published writers and professional development fund.
www.scottisharts.org.uk

Scottish Book Trust

The leading agency for the promotion of literature, reading and writing in Scotland Manages the Live Literature scheme which subsidises writer events (includes playwrights) in educational and community settings and runs a writer development programme which includes mentoring.
www.scottishbooktrust.com

Scottish Society of Playwrights

a professional members' organisation that represents, develops, and promotes the interests and craft of playwrights working within Scottish theatre.

www.scottishsocietyofplaywrights.co.uk

The Stage

The newspaper for the performance arts industry. Information-rich website features listings, reviews, how to guides and more.

www.thestage.co.uk

The Writer's Guild of Great Britain

The trade union for professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books and new media. Guidance for theatre writers on applying for G4A funding is available in the Rates and Agreement section of the WGGB website.

www.writersguild.org.uk