

Polly Stenham on the dangers of vanity



December 5, 2016 - British playwright Polly Stenham wrote her first play, *That Face*, in 2007 when she was 19 years old. The critically-beloved play would open at the Royal Court before going on to be produced on London's West End and eventually running at New York's Manhattan Theatre Club. In the years since Stenham has written three more plays, in addition to adapting her own work for the screen and working alongside director Nicolas Winding Refn as a writer on his 2016 film, *The Neon Demon*. She is currently working on an adaptation of *The Odyssey* for Britain's National Theatre.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3400 words.

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Of all the forms of creative writing, playwrighting still feels the most exotic. Maybe it's just because I know so few people who do it.

Really? That's interesting. What's kind of cool about being a playwright—what I definitely enjoy—is that you straddle two worlds. You're a writer, but it's different than being a novelist or a poet. You never see your work published in the same way—you never get to have that lovely object, or very rarely. You are part of the literary world, but still removed from it. And you are also kind of involved in show business: the actor world, the theater world, and sometimes the film world. So I love that it is both. I think that's really fun. You get to wear two faces.

Aside from making movies, writing plays is perhaps the most profoundly collaborative. You make this thing, you have this vision, and then you are dependent on this team of people to turn it into an experience that other people can share.

I mean, it is sort of brilliant and terrible. I think in a way you've got to look at it as if you are an architect. Someone once told me this and I always repeat it, but a good play has to be able to sustain and hold up an entire production. It creates all of this industry around itself. You know, there are going to be lighting designers, there are going to be actors, there are going to be managers. The play has to be able to support the weight of all that. So in that sense, it really is a kind of architecture. It's amazing when you see it done properly and can witness the play really doing that. It's even more amazing to see your play done more than once at different theaters. It's so interesting, kind of in the same way that hearing different people cover the same song can be interesting. The versions may be very different, but if the song being covered is good, the quality of that—the architecture of it—will kind of shine through.

Seeing other people interpret your work—when it's done well—is brilliant. And when it's done badly, it's horrific. But even when it's bad you still learn something. I think that what's quite good about the collaborative nature of theater is that it sort of kills a lot of vanity. You can't really be too vain because you've got several other layers the play has to get through before an audience can actually see it, so it's hard to be too indulgent or you'll just get squashed by a director or an actor. I think it's exciting though. When you sit down finally to watch it, you lose the control. When you sit down to watch and one of the actors suddenly goes off piece, you might fucking hate it and you don't know what's going to happen or how people will interpret it. You're no longer in control of it, which is both the best thing and the worst thing about it. You've done your part, but then it becomes something else.

Also, seeing your play performed in a foreign country is totally amazing. It's like they are on acid or

something-or like YOU are on acid. It's just so completely weird. Seeing something you wrote being performed in Japanese, for example. It's your work, but you've had nothing to do with it. It's sort of dreamlike. You've truly just got to let it go, basically. And that is difficult sometimes. I've struggled with that.

Is there something about your personality that makes you particularly well-suited to writing plays or screenplays? Or is there something about the format of plays that allows you to say things you couldn't necessarily express in, say, a novel?

Well, I couldn't say whether it is the chicken or the egg—which came first, exactly—but I've noticed that my mind, certainly as I've gotten older, seems to be built in a way that causes me to be very binary. It's a huge frustration with my partners and family and friends, at times. I can flip my opinion to the absolute opposite very convincingly within the span of about five minutes. And I'll genuinely believe it. I can go from one extreme to another. I don't know whether or not that informed my writing dialogue and the way that, when you write plays, you sort of need to be both of the people at all times, or if writing plays has somehow influenced me to be that way now, but I imagine it's a bit of both. I think I like to try and be everyone and to try and understand all of the perspectives. In writing plays I feel like I'm taking part in a constant ongoing investigation to understand cruelty and the darker parts of human nature. Not as a means of condemning them or forgiving them, just to try and understand them better.

I grew up around a lot of mental illness and I think that also helped drive me towards the theater. I think plays are one of the most human of the arts because at it's most basic level it generally involves people talking to other people, which itself is being watched by people. There's really not much else going on usually. You need live people to perform it, you need live people to watch it. There's only so much trickery that can be performed on stage. Everybody knows it's not real. It's so ancient, this idea of people watching people, often doing terrible things to people. It's an experience... and it's the only thing that's ever really felt natural to me. I don't find it easy. Fuck, no. It's really hard. And it only gets harder the more self-aware you become as a person. But I think it fits me for some reason. Who knows. Am I the person I am because I am a playwright? Am I a playwright because of the person I am? I don't know.

You had the unusual experience of making something very early in your life that people paid a lot of attention to. You were 19 when *That Face* became a sensation.

That's a blessing, that.

How did you deal with that? Or *did* you deal with it?

Yeah, did I deal with it? [Laughs] I mean, I'm 10 years on now and I've been reflecting on that quite a lot lately because suddenly it's like... yeah, it's been ten years since that happened. I'm 30 now. One of the huge positives of that experience was simply that enabled me to jump right into a career at an early age. And because of that play's success, everything I've done since has been put up and it's always been staged in the professional arena. I was 19 when I wrote that first one and it all just happened so fast. I immediately went straight into writing the next one, straight into writing the third, straight into writing the fourth, and now I'm on my fifth play. I went straight from university directly into just doing it. I think if I were starting to write my first thing now I'd be really insecure. I think you get more chinks in your armor the older you get, don't you? And you get more fearful. It's kind of like doing a sport. You know when you see little tiny kids on skis? They have on their little helmets and they are absolutely fearless. You don't know enough to be afraid yet. I was kind of like that when I started.

I think I've learned to sort of push off the fear that might otherwise derail me. I've learned along the way to trust my instincts. The bad things about my experience just had to do with being young. I was 21 when I was sort of having the worst time of it. I didn't know what I was fucking doing. I was running around, getting drunk, being crazy... you know, like a young person. I mean, I had a great time, who am I kidding? I had loads of fun. Was it bad? No, it wasn't that bad, but it did kind of do my head in at times. I think that's the classic thing about early success, Isn't it? You kind of want things to happen on a slower gradient. Maybe you'd appreciate it more if it weren't all happening so quickly. I never fully realized what was going on. You get really worried that

what you've done will be the best thing you ever do.

Honestly, that's what gets scary. You start to think, in your darker moments, "That was when I was 19. That's the thing that I'll be measured against forever. That's the only one anyone wants to see or talk about." That wasn't true, of course, the next one, *Tusk Tusk*, did well too— but not quite as well. When you make something that becomes kind of a classic for people it's hard not to soon realize that you might not ever have that experience again. That's a possibility. The only thing you can do is just fucking work hard and raise your game. Most important, you've got to enjoy the process. I've always got to be careful to remind myself that it's not about what happens to it, it's about making it.

There is this terrible idea that if something doesn't do at least as well—if not a little bit better—than the thing you made before, then it's a failure. And the idea of artistic or creative failure is almost always synonymous with financial failure, when they are in fact two very different things.

That's actually something I like about being in the theater. In a way, unless you write the next *Cats* or *Hamilton* or whatever, you're not ever really going to make a huge amount of money. In that way, it's a little less corruptible. I think if you are good and you work hard, it will eventually happen. Maybe in the art world or the music world—the art world, in particular—you can be fucking brilliant and still never be recognized. But yes, in general, money corrupts it all.

Have you worked on adapting your own work for the screen?

Yes, I adapted my second play for the screen. I wrote the screenplay. I have to say, it was an odd and confusing process. It's sort of like distorting something a bit. I think you've got to sort of almost not work from the play at all, just work from the original idea and start all over again.

Can you imagine what you might have done if you hadn't been a playwright?

Me? Oh my god. I was just having this conversation with someone yesterday. Or was it this morning? I'd like to think I'd be a veterinarian, but I have absolutely no scientific aptitude and I really hate blood. Also, I'm quite scared of a lot of animals. I like to think I'd do something noble like that. In reality, I really love set design and that sort of thing. I would have loved to have done that. Again, you need to be practical and I'm not. I would have ended up in a kind of make believe world. In some way, shape, or form I think that would have always been the case. I would love to be a novelist. I'd love to write a novel one day.

Polly Stenham recommends:

[Radiohead](#)

[T.S Eliot](#)

[Romeo and Juliet](#) - The Baz Luhrmann film

The introduction to [Plays One](#) by Harold Pinter

[A Streetcar Named Desire](#)

How would that be different from writing plays?

It's so different. In plays you've only got so much you can show. You've basically only got what people say out loud. You don't have the ability to really show what they think. I mean, the actors are conveying these things, but it's tricky. People are actually often saying what they don't think. Or they are lying. That's the fun and the difficult aspect of it. You don't get to go into their heads... well, rarely. I don't really like plays when you do that that too much. I don't like long monologues, I think it's counter to the point.

In plays, characters should show you how they feel with their actions. To stop and say those things out loud feels like cheating. It can also totally take you, the viewer, right out of the play.

Yeah, it's totally cheating. I'm sure I'll eat my words on that at some point. I mean with a novel you get to

present this complicated stew of consciousness. You can describe what it feels like to experience something, and that's just incredible. When that's done well, it makes me feel less lonely. I don't know if it's the experience of being a person and sort of being locked in to their specific consciousness is what I find so frightening, but writing that is hard. So, yes, I would love to write a novel, but my prose is really strange now because I'm so used to using speech and proliferating however the fuck I want in my plays. My grammar would need to improve. I think I'd need to practice really hard. But it's something I'd like to do. It's on my bucket list.

Your work can be fairly intense. Do you find that people that have never met you have funny ideas about you based solely on what your plays are like?

[Laughs] Oh, I'm sure they do. Let's see... that everything is quite posh and dysfunctional. As for my plays, you know... there is some form of drugging or spiking in all of them and usually at least one person wets themselves. I think in three of the four plays—or maybe in four of them?—that happens. Whatever that says about me is probably not good. It's hard not to read into people and their work, isn't it? It's frustrating. You don't really get to live it down.

Do you ever feel like you've exhausted exploring these kinds of stories, like you want to go and do something totally different?

Dominic Cooke, the former artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre, said to me something really smart. He said, "Don't be afraid of writing the same thing over and over again. If that is your myth, if that is your thing that you need to investigate, then just keep at it. When it's time to change, it'll be time to change. You'll feel it. Don't change just for the sake of changing." Often I'd felt like I was writing the same play over and over again, so that felt like good advice.

I think actually I wrote three plays investigating really similar stuff about mothers. Then I know that my fourth plays kind of starts like a family play, but then the maid takes someone hostage and the world comes crashing down. My new one is set in a different historical period, which is something totally new to me. The progression from play to play feels very organic, but I definitely had a moment while writing my second play when I was like, "Shit, should I be writing something about the banking process?" I was having a bit of a dark moment with my writing and I started googling interviews with different people, which is something I hardly ever do, to read things they'd said about writing. I remember reading about how Donna Tartt spent about ten years writing *The Goldfinch* and how at one point she had to get rid of about a year's worth of work. That felt oddly comforting to me.

I remember a quote that I loved—maybe from her?—that said something to the effect of "You've got to be behind the work, not in front of it. That's when it's good." And that also felt very true. I think when you find yourself in front of the cart and you're trying to drag it along behind you, the work doesn't feel very truthful. It's better to write the same thing over and over—and do it honestly, truthfully—than to try and write something differently and do it dishonestly. If you're not done with the material, you're not done with the fucking material. I think to deny that is sort of like ignoring your subconscious, which is where it all comes from.

It's interesting, in this play that I'm writing at the moment I noticed that the siblings in all my plays are very strong presence. The love between the siblings is quite often the triumph in the story. I'd never really noticed that before, but in all four of my previous plays that is really the last thing, the only thing, that's left at the end. In my new one, through no planning at all, that gets upended when a sibling relationship gets destroyed in favor of a romantic relationship... and that's really interesting to me. I noticed this and thought, "Oh my god, I've just NOT done the same thing and I don't know why." That feels organic. Had I set out to do that, we probably would have ended up with something completely different.

I love the way that we are always working these things out, even if we don't realize that we are. You think you're doing one thing, saying one thing, but your subconscious is working on something else entirely...

I think it's really important to just to trust it, whatever it is. It's also about not having vanity, I guess. That's a thing I literally have pinned on my computer—do not be vain. It's really hard not to put in the thing

that sounds really good but doesn't actually serve the story at all. Trying to be different for the sake of being different, that's a form of vanity isn't it? As soon as there is vanity in your work, you can fucking smell it. Vanity congests it, slows it down, and you can hear it in the writing. That's my biggest issue always... and it's so difficult, that battle.

How does that battle manifest in your work? Is it a question of making your characters give lofty speeches that sound good but that they would or should never actually say?

Yeah. Again, I just think of it as showing off. You can have a big riffy poetic speech that sells the story and accelerates the action and is truthful and required and believable... but it's hard. And rare, I think. You can tell when—as the playwright—you're just flexing, and then it's got to go. That's really difficult though. There is a line I wrote for *Tusk Tusk* that might just be my favorite line I've ever written and I had to take it out because it slowed down the play. It was just better without it. That's a process you kind of get used to as a playwright because you typically endure a ton of cutting. And sometimes you write something and love it and then you hear it spoken over and over and realize it's not working and just sounds like crap. One of my friends who is a director said that good writers aren't afraid of cutting because they know that it will come back. If it's any good it will come back in some form later on. I think that's really true.

Did that line from *Tusk Tusk* ever come back?

No! So... maybe it wasn't good? You never know. There's still time.

- As told to T. Cole Rachel

Name

Polly Stenham

Vocation

Playwright, Screenwriter

Fact

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Photo: Laura Pannack