

Chapter Seven – Rage - Transcript

Writing and performing spoken word poetry is a seriously vulnerable act. Um, and the more you do so the more you're going to get comfortable with using your own experiences as starting points for your poems. Which is fantastic but I just want to really underline the importance of taking care of yourself while you're writing.

CHAPTER 7 – TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

When I was writing the show I was doing lots and lots of planning and mind mapping - a lot more than I would normally do just for a single poem. Um, just because it was obviously a lot longer and I had to do a bit more research. So I was doing a lot of mind mapping and research specifically surrounding the witch trials. And it shouldn't have surprised me but, oh, I was so angry - the amount of rage that was brought up inside me while learning about the witch trials and having to really engage with how I was feeling about that, I was so unbelievably angry. To find out that there was over two and a half thousand people killed in Scotland for the crime of witchcraft and around ninety-three percent of them were women. That...brought up so much rage in me that I didn't know what to do with it. It really wasn't a nice feeling and I usually write happy poems. I-I-I like to make people laugh with my poetry. So much of my poetry is based on comedy. So to have this feeling, that I wasn't really used to and it wasn't a nice feeling but I knew that it was something that I still wanted to write about - I kind of had to engage with that feeling in a very specific way. If you're at this stage in the programme then you are now really familiar with using your own experiences and emotions as the starting points for your writing. The more comfortable you are with that the more likely that the whole process is going to...open you up to emotions that you haven't felt before or emotions that you haven't felt or engaged with in a long time. And sometimes they won't all be good emotions. As you know spoken word can be anything and it can cover any topic; including things that are sad or angry or painful. I just want to make it clear, at this point, this is not me saying that you should be writing sad or angry or painful poems. If that's not what you are, um, I would never ask you to do that and no one should ask you to do that, ever. However, if that is something that you want to engage with in your writing those are perfectly valid feelings. When I was writing 'Dark' I knew that I was going to have to come up with ways, both in the writing and the performing, so that the rage that I-I was feeling, the rage and the pain that I was feeling while I was doing the mind mapping was never going to affect me or hurt me when I was ever performing the poem on stage. There are many ways to do this, many tools and techniques that are really useful even if your, all your writing is happy and funny these will still help you too. So we're going to be looking at those now.

TRANSCRIPT FOR 'DARK'

are you scared yet?

it's the tingling on the back of your neck through to under your tongue the pill you cannot get your mouth to swallow unwittingly getting a taste of what they are force-feeding are you scared yet?

are you squashing it down deep and hidden and part of you like the bones and the skeletons in your closet that you never put there the ones with the eyes that still stare watch you everywhere are you scared of what's going to come out of the furniture at night if you ever dared tell are you scared yet? is the ink you swirl around your mouth fine as wine and fit for decanting to page turn to ash turn to gristle in your teeth

turn to nothing turn to black hole making negative of the universe you held in your soul or worse has it been siphoned out of your speech and into their pens already rewriting a version of the story that you hold in your veins we all know how this one goes it's a cautionary tale are you scared yet? scared of letting go of your anger your rage the untamable tempest battering your rib cage I've swallowed down so many stories that didn't agree with me I got tired of bringing up the past the tingling in my throat is from when I swallowed coals taken from the hearth of Grandmother courage and let it burn it turned to poison and I got sick but I got better I got stronger let them choke on the taste of what they made me festering and broken and ripe for the picking in the beginning there was a blank page bright eyes and a storybook age by torchlight we hid it did nothing to stop him in cupboards we hid it did nothing to stop him in darkness we hid it did nothing to stop him

the only thing that did was a mouth full of courage and the spilled ink was mopped the stain still on our lives for years the truth swilled around my clever mouth and now it's too late to let it come out are you scared yet? you should be because I rose from the ashes of all that you made me in this time round I'm fireproof I'm the proof of what can happen when you tear down the walls and let the light in open the doors and set the worlds to right in the pit of your pain is the heart of my flame and I will let it light you up I am half the world I am angry and I am tired but you cannot keep me in the dark forever I don't hide by torchlight anymore this is the part of me that no one has ever seen before

and I'm sorry if it's hard for you to watch but stories are powerful things so while I have you moth to flame

she's coming for you I am coming for you we are all coming for you we will have our revenge and it starts right here with this just this I'll never be afraid of you again

CHAPTER 7 – PERFORMANCE

Spoken word or performance poetry is that - it's performance. This is the part that comes at the end of the process. You've learned how to mind map and plan, you've got to grips with your writing and you've been able to edit little bits and pieces of your writing and now we're going to come to the fundamentals of performing. So much of spoken word comes from the performance element of it. Like I said at the very start of the programme, it's as much about what you say and how you say it as it is about your writing. This is my favourite part of the process because it's where I feel that I really get to know my poems. This is the part where I really feel that my poetry and my writing reveals itself to me because I'm figuring out how it is

that I want to present them to the world. Now I'm going to show you what to do and then you're going to have some time to be able to do this yourself so just watch at this point. Like I've said before, back in Chapter Four, I take a moment to steady myself. I ground myself. I stand with my shoulders back. I take a couple of deep breaths, my hands on my hips if I feel that I need them... I remind myself that I'm allowed to take up space. I have a right to be here and what I have to say is important. And then I...practice the performance. Now what I'm going to do for this is I'm just going to pick a short piece of my writing and you're going to do the same in a minute. So if there's a piece that you have in your mind, like a little bit that's your favourite, that you think you can play around a lot with, that's great. If not there'll be time for you to pick that apart. But what I'm going to do is I'm going to take a piece from the poem 'Spark'. I'm going to...pick the couple of lines 'Remember not every ghost has to die to get there and not everything that dies has to stay dead. Breathe just breathe.' When I perform that in the show it's said with a kind of sense of urgency. I-I'm speaking extremely loudly, it's-it's important, it's urgent but that's because I've had the whole poem to work up to that point. Now just for the purpose of this, um, exercise where we're going to be thinking about performance just on its own - I'm going to take that piece and what I'm going to do, is I'm going to practice performing it with different emotions. Like I say it's-it's urgent and desperate - now we're going to try and see if it works in any other emotion. CALM - Remember not every ghost has to die to get there and not everything that dies has to stay dead breathe just breathe. ELATED - Remember not every ghost has to die to get there and not everything that dies has to stay dead breathe just breathe. FRUSTRATED- Remember not every ghost has to die to get there and not everything that dies has to stay dead breathe just breathe. Out of context that...little chunk of the poem 'Spark' works in all those different emotions and that's-these are all things that I played, um, with when I first wrote the poem...and what you saw in the show is what I decided was the best way to present it. This is a nice kind of figuring out point where you get to...practice the emotions and you get to reveal parts of the poem that you didn't even know were there. So go back through your notebook and pick a section that you have written in from a previous exercise and you're going to practice saying it in...completely different ways! Another couple of things to keep in mind except the emotion is things like the volume - how quiet or how loud are you? Um, your pitch - how low is your voice or how high is your voice? Um, what about gestures - is this something that will work if your arms are out? Are they by your side? Are you really still? Are you trying to take up as much space as possible? Do you have lots of nervous energy? Play around with that and also...pauses. Take breaths... Remember that it's not a race to just get all the words out. It's a performance. It's a story. There are...pauses for dramatic effect or just to...give yourself a breath before you move on to the next part. Play with all of these things and get playful take it to us-take it to places that you don't expect it working at all because it might reveal something in the poem that you never knew was there. When I perform 'Dark' in the show I sound angry and hurt...but I'm not. Maybe I was angry and hurt when I was writing the poem...but I'm not when I perform it. When I'm angry and I'm hurt - I get tears in my eyes, I get really blotchy and I get-my-my voice goes really high in pitch as I'm trying not to cry and it-it-I couldn't do the show if I was in that place. So I practised. I practised the emotions behind the words without having to go near the emotions themselves. Also if I didn't do that then the audience would know that I was really in pain. They'd be able to tell and that would make them uncomfortable as well which...they don't want. I'm there to tell them a story and I'm there to take them on a journey; they will get what it is that they need to get without me having

to hurt myself on stage for them to see it. I practised the emotions that came with 'Dark' so I was protected but I did that with all the other poems as well. So if you're sitting there saying: 'I'm not writing unhappy poems. I just want to write happy poems.' That's fantastic you still have to get to this stage where you play with it. Before you sit down to write - you mind map and you plan and you sift through all the things that you don't want so you know that when you're writing you have all the things that you do want. There's an element of that and (before you go out and perform as well) of practising. You try it in all the ways that don't work so that you are very sure that the way that does work is the way that you want to present your work to the world. A quick note on something called 'poet voice'. Which is where you think that you have to sound a certain way when you're reciting your poetry... When you feel that maybe you have to stretch out your vowels and make things sound really dramatic or speak really quickly and run-on sentences and then stop... You don't have to do that at all. The best poet voice is your voice. Don't feel that you have to sound like anyone apart from yourself. Just be aware of it. It's easy to fall into - I've done it myself many times.

FIVE MINUTE TIMER

CHAPTER 7 – PERSONIFICATION & METAPHOR

Personification and metaphor are great tools to use to distance yourself from subjects that might be difficult to talk about. Um, to just cover the basics; personification is when you give an inanimate object or you give an object that isn't human, human-like traits. or example, to say that: 'A tree is strong' - that is personification. And a metaphor is when you say that one thing is another: 'My heart is a bird'. Using these as writing techniques, in the poetry where you know you have something to say but there's things that you don't want to talk about (and no one is entitled to that, no one's asking you to share that. Don't share that unless you want to.) But being able to...take little parts of that private thing...and to get it down on paper - using personification and metaphor - are great ways to help you...channel that experience into writing that is still safe for you, um, to perform and the audience to hear. It can also make what you have to say a lot more interesting and it can also be the, kind of, facilitator for taking your writing in a direction that you didn't see it going - which can be really really... Which can be really nice, if you sit down to write about something sad and it goes and the poem takes itself somewhere else that's lovely.

WRITING EXERCISE – OBJECTS IN LOVE

So we're going to do a mini exercise in personification. And well like I've just said that's about giving a certain object personality traits and speaking to it as if it is a person. I'm going to use the guitar as an example. And now we're going to write down all of its traits that can be personified. So, for example...it's musical; the guitar is a musical instrument. It sings... The guitar has curves... The ca-the guitar has a neck... The guitar has-has strings that can snap, that sometimes-that dig into our fingers...that can hurt us the more we play... We play a guitar so it's playful... A guitar can be...joyous and sad... It can be-it can give out music that makes all kinds of emotions so it's emotive, it's an emotive thing. The one I'm looking at has a small chip out the bottom so it's chipped... Which means it's well-used... These are all things that you can use to personify something. Now, this chapter's main exercise is to write a love letter, (we've done love letters all the way back in the chapter about odes) um, between two inanimate objects. They can be any two objects that are on the list around the screen. We're going to take ten minutes

to mind map as many things that come to mind about the two objects that you pick. Ten minutes might seem like a long time but after, you need time to get rid of the more obvious things that come to mind to get to the stuff that will be really useful in your writing. I had a friend who did this exercise once and she chose a key and the first things she wrote were things like: 'Oh it's-it's silver or it can be bronze...' But the more she thought about it she, um, thought about things like: 'It's a gift on your 21st birthday' or 'Women are taught to carry them between their knuckles when they're walking home at night.' So take ten minutes to mind map. Happy writing.

TEN MINUTE TIMER

EXERCISE CONTINUES

Now that you have your list of...all the things you can think of for your two objects - take another five minutes to see how many things you can turn into personifications. So take any of the information that you have in front of you and see if you can turn it into a human-like personal trait. Like I said in the example before when I picked the guitar; if you wrote down its musical then what you could say is that it's a good singer. If you picked a key and then said that it was made of metal then you could say that, uh, it's made of stronger stuff. So take five minutes just to see how much, uh, personification you can get out of those exercises. Again, we're still in the planning stages so it can be messy. Happy writing.

FIVE MINUTE TIMER

EXERCISE CONTINUES

Now we're ready to move on and write our letter from one object to the other. Like with the letters that we've done before, they've got a really obvious structure. So you start with a 'Dear' one object and you end with a 'Love' the other object. But what you want, um, to do is to try to, as much as possible... If you write a let-this letter and then give it to someone who has no idea what exercise you're doing, you want it to sound like this could genuinely be a conversation between two people. Play around with this one, this is the one where you get to really play with language and experiment and, um, just have a lot of fun. So take ten minutes to write your letter from one object to the other. Happy writing.

TEN MINUTE TIMER

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

I think if you are new to spoken word, especially if you're a young person, then you are already going through so much. Spoken word is a great way to navigate so many things but it can also bring up things that you thought were long settled. Now that you have this...new tool this new way to...look at, examine, and contextualize in a creative and...cathartic way which is totally normal and valid and useful. Just please remember to be kind to yourself when you're writing. Be kind to your stories, be kind to your memories, just be kind to yourself, and make sure that you take as much space as you need - whenever you need it. Use personification and metaphor and practice your performance technique so you can still, and always, convey the emotions that you want to convey without ever having to put yourself in emotion-in an emotional situation that you don't want to be in.

TOP TIP – DON'T EXPLAIN THE POEM

One of my pet peeves, when I'm at a poetry show, is when a poet gets on stage and they spend, like, at least a minute explaining the poem. So they go up and they say: 'Hi, my name is Sarah and this poem is called 'Dark'. And I wrote it, um, when I was this age and I was going through this stuff and I was thinking about this and I was thinking about this and I decided that I wanted to write something about it and...' Oh, it bothers me so much because I'm like: 'Why are you telling me this, when I'm here to see the poem?' This especially happens when poets have written things that are...private or very sad or quite dark. You don't need to introduce your poem because if you do then that diminishes the impact and the effect that the poem itself is going to have. However, if you feel that there's things that are in your poem that might potentially trigger audiences then what you should do is just add a content warning at the beginning. From what I've seen most poets that do go up and spend a long time introducing the poems are either...not confident about performing or they feel that they have shared a bit too much of themselves in their poetry. And if it's the first one then we are building confidence throughout this so hopefully, um, you won't feel that you need to explain the poem when going up. But if it's the second one maybe you are revealing too much of yourself that's private. Maybe you are, um, making yourself, uh, too vulnerable in a way that might hurt you on stage. So maybe you go back over your poem and see if there's any of the ways we've talked about - using personification and metaphor or performance technique - to distance yourself from the writing if that's what you feel anyway. An example of how I would go about introducing 'Dark' is, I would go on stage and say: 'Hello, my name's Sarah and this poem is called 'Dark'. It comes with a content warning for sexual violence and abuse.' And then I would just start the poem. By giving the audience the content warning I've...done my part in terms of letting them know if there's content that might be upsetting them. If there's members of the audience that feel upset and they don't want to listen then it's their responsibility to remove themselves from the situation. That's-you-you-do, you give the content warning and that's you doing their-your part and if they feel they need to leave then they can and that's fine. And that's them doing their part. Just generally good advice for watching or writing or performing poetry is just remember that self-care is extremely important in all three.

UP NEXT – CHAPTER 8 – POWER & EMPOWERMENT