

Karen

Hartman

Q Once you have an idea, how do you proceed? Do you take notes? Do you outline? Do you plunge right in?

A I make a Word file called “[working title] thoughts” and I freewrite into this file for as long as I’m working on the project—this might be daily or it might be whenever I get a chance to work on this particular idea. Those thoughts raise questions that lead to research. I prefer actual physical books because I can mark pages with post-its and go back and forth between the reading and the writing, and also I like the space they take up on the shelf. Books work in a more associative inspirational way for me than online research, though of course I do that too.

During the freewriting in the “thoughts” file, dialogue usually comes, sometimes a few lines, sometimes a few pages. It might show up very early, in the first fifteen minutes on the first day, or it might take months. Once dialogue comes, I go back and forth between the thoughts file, and dialogue. If I’m lucky, those first bits of dialogue will be some opening scenes in order, or they may just be fragments that open the world.

Q Do you have a routine? A regular time when you write?

A I prefer to write in the mornings, but I take what I can get. Since my son was born nine years ago I’ve gotten less picky about writing time. I write regularly, I just don’t have the same superstitions I used to (although truth be told, when I have an opportunity to write in the morning before speaking to another human, it’s golden). I choose to believe my process isn’t too fragile.

I do begin most work sessions with fifteen minutes of quick writing about whatever is on my mind, a modification of Julia Cameron’s “morning pages” in *The Artist’s Way*. It helps shuck off some of the daily crap. In a retreat situation, these fifteen minutes jump right into dialogue, like the world is already far away. I love that.

Q When you begin a first draft, do you write straight through? Do you write in order? What’s your process?

A I write in order. Once in a while there is a snippet of something that I save for later in the play, but I’m a believer in spending it now (story, plot, emotion), because if you spend it now you will have to dig deeper later. Sometimes by scene two I’ve reached what I thought would be the climactic event, which is great because then there is more of a ride.

But in order doesn’t mean “smoothly

in flow.” Often the initial impulse will not sustain a whole play, so I’m repeatedly getting stuck, digging and expanding.

I continue freewriting—in that “thoughts” file—ideas for how the story might go, or questions for or about the characters (“for” meaning I interview the characters). I make inventories of what I know and don’t know. Sometimes I write plot points on index cards and put them on the wall in a horizontal line. Then above and below that storyline I place other cards with moral questions, or images, or character secrets, or other non-linear pieces of knowledge I’m gathering. I was happy when I figured out this “vertical” and “horizontal” axis business, as a way to mark progress without reducing to a summary. I don’t always do it, but I teach it.

In the last five years I’ve opened a documentary vein, which means I do things like read 1000 pages of newlywed letters from 1945, or sit in on a monthly court for a year, or ride around with firefighters in New Haven. I like beginner’s mind, I like not knowing how the process will work, I like a challenge.

Q Once you’re at work, are there other art forms you go to for continued inspiration?

AI read, including fiction that seems emotionally tied to the story. I gather portraits (photographs) of people who could be the characters in the play. I learned this from Ming Cho Lee's set design course. It's strangely useful.

I usually choose an album and listen to it again and again the whole time I am writing a particular play. I'm less consistent about that now that I'm in musical limbo—like, album?

I understand this question. I love the idea of walking to a museum and gathering inspiration and I have done it and it works! But a more direct approach, for me, works better.

QWhat aspect of the craft is most difficult for you?

A1) Story. Story is hard. I used to say I was bad at story but now I will just say story takes me a long time to get right.

2) Emotion. I am at home with heavy subjects (currently: pediatric AIDS, the Holocaust, street prostitution, and Gaza—I am the WORST PERSON to answer “so what do you write about”) but I do get sad. I cry when I write, not like a tear in the eye but huge blubbery sobs which can easily slip from raw connection to a more bystander-like despair. I've discovered that whatever will help me surface is probably what the audience needs too. The cloudbreak might be comedy or sex, anything to lure me back to work and lure you back into the story. So calibrating emotion is part of the craft.

QWhat do you do when you get stuck?

AI'm jealous of writers who clean when they get stuck. That would be so great. My house would be so clean.

Usually stuck means procrastinating, which means fear. I do what everyone does which is to spend too much time on the internet. Once shame overrides the fear I turn off the internet and set a timer. I write without stopping, into a new file so I don't feel like I'm polluting the play.

If it's a more profound stuck, like the work was going well but now there's a dead end, or my story plan feels fake, or I

need to deepen the play but I don't know how, I call that state “awaiting further wisdom.” I am awaiting further wisdom on a play right now. That is a time to pivot to other activities or other work, take a break. Most of us can write 1000 words in a morning, and yet an 18,000-word play takes a year or more. Stuck is just math.

QDo you have any thoughts or advice about dialogue?

ACut. Two brilliant tricks about cutting I learned early:

From Marlane Meyer: When you write a line that is more than one sentence long, but not a monologue (meaning it doesn't take a journey) you are writing multiple sentences because you seek one perfect sentence. Cut it to one imperfect sentence, to train yourself to find the perfect sentence.

From Eric Overmyer: Cut everything in which a character questions the circumstances or misunderstands another character, i.e.: “What are we doing here?” “Why are you asking me that?” “What do you mean, purple?” This is difficult because that cloggy way of speaking is so natural, and such lines can seem to be crucial to a rhythm but #1 these lines are just you stalling or questioning yourself, and #2 they train the audience not to pay attention.

Combined, these are magic.

QDo you have any particular principles or practices about character or character development?

ACharacter is intuitive for me. I'm drawn to idealistic, messy people doing the wrong things for the right reasons; I don't have much use for villains or schemers.

I'm in an evolving process around character and race. I've always worked with actors from all backgrounds, but that's not the same as writing across race in a contemporary realm. Intuition has its limits, in that case. There is more research. And although I don't like being rewritten by actors, I have a little more humility when the actor shares the race of a character and I don't.

Some of the work I'm doing now has a hybrid documentary component, so there is a sense of channeling another person who is *actually* another person, not a scaled-up aspect of myself. For *Project Dawn*, in which seven actresses portray fourteen staff members and participants in a Philadelphia prostitution court, I spent weeks piecing together interviews and thoughts and questions to “make” each person. There is more assembly required.

QHow extensively do you rewrite, and is that mostly before or during rehearsal?


AI tinker and hone extensively but the shape usually holds. I rarely make a huge change like throwing out a character or scene.

I log a lot of time processing exposition. It feels like half the hours I have spent on *Roz and Ray*, a medical drama, have been reworking a couple pages in which two people in 1979 casually discuss a new blood product. They must maintain a precise level of ignorance while conveying a precise amount of information, and it's a pain.

My intention is to do everything before rehearsal but, inevitably, there is more work to do. I don't have a perfect ear. Maybe one day.

QWhat's the most important craft advice you can give?

APlays are dense. You can and should get more in there than you think. The goal of cutting is not brevity, but a coiled compression. What seems to be your idea for a play is probably either an idea for a short play, or the beginning of an idea for a full-length play.

Or: Turn off the internet and set a timer for 45 minutes. 

KAREN HARTMAN has four productions of three world premieres this season: *Roz and Ray* at Seattle Rep and *Victory Gardens*, *The Book of Joseph* at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, and *Project Dawn* at People's Light. She is Senior Artist in Residence at University of Washington, Seattle.