**Transcript for The Gathering Podcast: Special Episode - 37 Plays**

- [Alex] Welcome to "The Gathering," a podcast for artists and creatives from Arts Lancashire. I'm Alex O'Toole and this is a special episode created in association with the RSC Blackpool Grand Theatre and Northern Broadsides. It's a widely held opinion that Shakespeare may have first performed some of his most famous plays, not in London, but Lancashire. In Elizabethan times, Lancashire was a much larger county than it is today, and it is believed that, in his teenage years, Shakespeare came to live with relatives at Horton Tower near Preston, and later also at Rockford Old Hall in Rockford. It was there that a young William Shakespeare or William Shakeshaft, as he is referred to in the will of his uncle Alexander Houghton, that Shakespeare began to write and perform. At the same time, a short distance away in Prescott, which was once part of Lancashire, was the only purpose built indoor theater outside of London. And it was there that the first ever performances of William Shakespeare's "Richard III" and "Love's Labour's Lost" are supposed to have taken place. Fast forward some four centuries and Shakespeare's connection to the north of England is stronger than ever. And now, to mark the 400th anniversary of the publication of Shakespeare's first folio, the Royal Shakespeare Company have launched 37 Plays, a national new playwriting project. In Lancashire, this is being led by Blackpool Grand Theatre in association with Northern Broadsides, a theater company from Halifax, the Old Electric in Blackpool, and The Lowther Pavilion Theatre in Lytham. In this special episode of "The Gathering," I speak to the RSC's Head of National Partnerships, Robin Belfield, Blackpool Grand Theatre's Creative Learning producer Jo Cleasby, and Northern Broadsides' Resident Director Hallam Breen. To find out more about the opportunity, what the judges are looking and how Lancashire writers can get involved. Here's Robin.

- [Robin] So I'm Robin Bellfield, I'm the Head of National Partnerships at the Royal Shakespeare Company, The Royal Shakespeare Company based in Stratford-upon-Avon. Shakespeare is our focus. Shakespeare is our main house playwright, if you like, but a real drive to make Shakespeare's work live for everyone, everyone and anyone, and that's what we're constantly striving to do. So my is looking at working with our national partnerships, so we work with a number of theater partners across the country, Blackpool Grand Theatre, Blackpool being one of them, everywhere up from Northern Stage up in Newcastle, Newcastle Theatre Royal, all the way down to Hall for Cornwall at the other end of the country. So my role is working with our colleagues and those theater partners and with our network of schools that we call our associate schools, all of whom working together, collaborating on various different projects that make Shakespeare mean something to young people and also to community groups via our Shakespeare nation program as well. People who might not have accessed Shakespeare ever, or people who might not have accessed Shakespeare since primary school, however recently or current that might be for them. And our big drive is to make that first encounter, that first moment of either learning about Shakespeare in school or coming back to his work later on in life as a vivid, exciting, thrilling experience as possible. So my work is all about working with our theater partners and our school partner to make sure that, yeah, those encounters with Shakespeare aren't just about sitting there reading, struggling with these long words that we haven't heard for 400 years, but about living it, breathing it, thinking it, thinking about the choices to be made with the language, enjoying the language, hearing it. So yeah. That's a bit about my work.

- [Alex] Yeah, hearing it's really important, I think, isn't it? It's quite difficult to read if you're not reading it all the time, but hearing it makes a big difference.

- [Robin] It really does. It really does. And when you look back at the theateR that Shakespeare was writing it's all about listening. Back in the 1600s, people talked about hearing a play, not seeing a play. We talk now about gonna see a play, whereas back then they talked about going to hear a play. It's called an auditorium because it's the place where we listen. It was described as a circle of ears. Do you know what I mean? Those round playhouses with lots of ears just focused on that. And we've lost that now. We pay much more focus on reading, which wasn't as big a focus for Shakespeare, until, and this might lead us naturally on, until the printing of the first folio, which is the first time all of those plays are written down in a collected volume, which is a pioneering thing, thinking about moving forward. Before that, the focus was on was on listening and hearing these words. And when that's what you've got, when you've got actors speaking and you've got audiences listening, you don't have the technology, you don't have lights and sound and visual films and projection. You've just got words and you've got imagination. Do you know what I mean? The magic that happens in that space between the words leaving an actor's mouth and entering an audience's ears is something very special indeed.

- [Alex] Yeah, absolutely! And you have led us very nicely on to 37 Plays. So can you tell us a little bit, what is 37 Plays?

- [Robin] So 37 Plays is the RSC's national playwriting project. So 400 years ago, in 1623, as I mentioned, Shakespeare's complete works, the 37 Plays that he wrote were compiled, after his death, were compiled by his good friends and colleagues into a compilation. And as I say, that was something to be revered. Here is a playwright's lifetime of creativity wrapped in a neat volume. Now looking back at those plays, we think of those plays, they speak volumes about the human condition and lots of universal themes that speak to us all, but they also speak about his life and time. They also speak about the things that were important to him, power, corruption, gender, and the interplay between men and women or fathers and children or mothers and children, parents and families and how that worked within his world. And so the 37 Plays is saying, "Well, if we were to create the first folio for now, what would that look like? And how would we capture the 37 Plays that spoke to our society, our culture now, and the breadth and scale of what culture means in Britain at the moment?" So it is an open invitation to get the nation writing. That's the basic premise that we want everyone and anyone, whether you've written plays before, whether they have been performed professionally or not, whether you are six years old, starting to write, or whether you are in your senior years and you thought, "I've never done this before, but I fancy giving it a go," then this is the chance. And we're working with our, as I say, with our theater partners across the country. So with theaters like the Grand in Blackpool to work with community groups, other theater companies like Northern Broadsides to get together as, "How can we spread the word?" That's it. That's the main thing. How can we get as many people writing their story? And so I think it's really important to say this isn't a response to Shakespeare's work. What we're not asking for is for anyone to say, "This is my version of Hamlet, or this is my version of Romeo and Juliet." If that's what people want to write, great, but that's not our requirement. Our requirement is that people write their stories, the stories of characters that they know or characters that they're inspired by or stories about where they live. These are the stories that matter to them in our lives now. So our aim is that we have lots of plays submitted in different formats, different lengths. There's no minimum, there's no maximum requirements, that we gather together a huge range of different diverse plays, in inverted commas. And then we will have the unenviable task of whittling those down to get 37 representative plays that we can then put in a digital version, you know?

- [Alex] Okay. So it's gonna be a digital version. So that does sound unenviable. Why is it important to capture these stories in this way from real people rather than professional playwrights who are doing this all the time?

- [Robin] Well, as I say, I think it's not about marking either. It's not about saying this is a professional playwriting competition, as you like, or it's not for... It's both. It's going, "How can we throw the net as wide as possible?" And it not being about whether you've done it before. I think the important thing is, certainly after the last few years that we've all been through, we know that people are made to tell stories, right? And I think we've all acknowledged that the stories that are heard loudest come from a small group of people. And I think this is a wonderful opportunity to go, "No, actually, let's put front and center the voices and the stories that we don't always hear, the voices and the stories that maybe most of us aren't aware of." We're trying, and this is the work in progress to be flexible about the format in which these plays are submitted. That you don't have to write a play with a traditional way or format that play, that you might have seen a play once before in your life. If that's not the way you want to write your play, then so be it, and we welcome that, and I think that's a really exciting possibility. Shakespeare moved forward the art of playwriting, and so we shouldn't be restricted by what we think. I'm doing a funny quote things with my fingers. What we think a play should look like or should read like. This is about a way of telling your story through character and location and how you want to present that. It's totally up to you.

- [Alex] I really like that. I really like that. I really hope that that will appeal to such a wide range of people. So just to be clear, who can enter and also what sort of stories are you hoping to receive?

- Well who can enter is absolutely anyone. The submission window is January next year. So we will open our online portal for submission. So there is a limit in terms of an age limit. If you are a young person wanting to write, it may be that a parent guardian or teacher is required to submit that for you, just for data purposes and safeguarding purposes. But we really hope, and that's why a lot of the work that we're doing through our partners, is in school. So we really hope to receive plays from young people, plays from older people, plays from the four nations and all the regions. That's what we are hoping for. So I can't tell you what we... I don't know what the stories are that we're gonna get in and no one here is thinking, "Oh, I really hope we get a story about XXX." Actually, what we hope is we hope that we get submissions from the breadth and length of the nation that takes in the whole diversity of who we are living on these islands. And that's our real hope that we are getting in plays from children, we're getting in place from our older generations, we're getting in place from the wonderful range of cultural heritages and backgrounds of people that have lived in this country for years or people who have just arrived here. That's what we're hoping for.

- [Alex] Okay, brilliant. So what will happen to those 37 plays that you do select, and what will happen to the writers behind them?

- So the 37 Plays will live in a digital format. Again, we're trying to think if the printed book was the pioneering folio of the time, what would our 37 Plays look like? And I think that is still malleable at the moment because again, it will depend to a certain degree on the format of plays that that come, how we make that folio. But we also know that we are going to commit to a script-in-hand reading of all 37. And again that won't just be at the RSC in Stratford, but some of those will take place in Blackpool, in Newcastle, in Nottingham, in Truro, in Bradford, in all our different partners around the country as well. So that will be the culmination of that, the celebration of the work. And then what happens then? Well, again, we're working with our partners to see what the legacy of the project is. Hopefully, the Grand Theatre from Blackpool would be able to say, "Look, there is a host of plays that have come from Lancashire. We haven't been able to select them all, but here they are." Let's put these writers in touch with the Grand and Northern Broadsides and say, "Look, there's such stories here to be told!" We realize that our output is limited to 37, but actually there's no reason why the legacy can't live. And I think it's that, making those connections through our partners, through our schools with writers, again, writers who are experienced and writers who maybe just finding out that they have a skill and the talent for this work, or just having a go.

- [Alex] That sounds really fantastic! And the fact that there's possibly two opportunities there for potential writers. If they don't get selected for the 37, there could be future possibilities for their work as well. So just one last question is if you're selected, are you wanting the writer to read that script-in-hand or record their play, or will you bring in actors to do that?

- No, we'll bring in actors to do that. So again, sense about cherishing the writer's role as a writer and allowing them to be part of that process, working with a director and actors to bring that stage reading to life. And I think that's really important for a writer to hear their own words. It's very difficult. And we've done this, actually. We did some initial workshops with with the Grand and we brought in actors with us. So we worked with a brilliant group on the Grand stage, and we just did some initial writing activities with a wonderful writer called Jack Holden. And from that workshop, the participants started to write monologues. And again it's that important step of then handing that over to an actor to read that. Again, we go back to that sense of hearing what it sounds like, that those words need to exist not on a page, but in a voice in the air, in our ears, in the space. So that will be an important part. So we'll work with our theater partners in terms of how we produce those script-in-hand performances. But that is essentially we would get a company of actors or companies of actors around the country to read those works out loud.

- [Alex] That's brilliant! That's so exciting. for someone who may be producing work for the first time and to have it read by someone else, it just lends that wonderful credibility and objectivity as well, doesn't it? So, oh! I just think it sounds brilliant!

- [Robin] The other part of it is that we hope to film them. So of course, it wouldn't be possible if you live in Blackpool, say. You might go and see the script-in-hand readings for those few plays. But actually, our intention is to film all of them, so again, we can have this digital place where people could download, stream those performances so it would be possible for you to, if you're keen, to see the full 37 plays.

- [Alex] Oh, fantastic! Yeah, I can see people wanting to do that, to make it maybe a bit of a daily ritual for a month or something like that.

- Yeah.

- That would be great! Thank you very much, Robin! That's brilliant! You've given us a really good overview there of everything that people will need to know. And of course, people can find more information at the 37 Plays website, which I will link to in the show notes.

- [Robin] There's lots of resources, lots of videos, there's that podcast, there's packs, loads of resources there to help anyone, especially if you are unfamiliar with playwriting or nervous about getting started. There's loads of resources there to help you out.

- [Alex] So what if you're new to playwriting or you're nervous about putting your work out there? As Robin said, you can find lots of resources to help you on the 37 Plays website, which I've linked in the show notes. But what if you need a little bit more support? Blackpool Grand Theatre has spent much of this autumn hosting playwriting workshops and scratch nights around the county to help people get their ideas onto paper and develop them. But as Jo Cleasby, Creative Learning Producer at the Grand, told me, the support doesn't stop there.

- [Jo] I'm Jo Cleasby, and I'm a Creative Learning Producer at Blackpool Grand Theatre. I am sure many people are familiar with the fabulous program of shows we have on the Grand Theatre stage from drama, music, comedy, and of course the infamous pantomime we have each year. But people might not be quite as familiar with the work that we do in creative learning, which is very much working with community participants, community groups. We run holiday clubs for our children in Blackpool and a lot of work done with local schools across Blackpool, Fylde, and Wyre. And my main role at the theater for the last 10 years has been leading on our partnership work with the Royal Shakespeare Company, as Robin mentioned, doing Shakespeare Nation with adult participants and then with our associate schools, of which we've got 20 schools, primaries, secondaries, and special needs schools across Blackpool, Fylde, and Wyre.

- [Alex] Yeah, I know you've been working with the RSC for a long time, haven't you?

- [Jo] Yeah, definitely. I mean, that partnership is completely embedded in the work we do and my role and it's brilliant when we get the touring shows as well. There's loads of exciting things that that RSC partnership has brought.

- [Alex] So Blackpool Grand are one of 12 partner theaters across the country. What have you been doing to get people involved in the 37 Plays initiative so far?

- [Jo] Yeah, so my ambition of 37 Plays is that we have as many submissions from Blackpool as possible and that we certainly have some of our plays selected on that final 37 cuts. So it's really about finding those opportunities for local people to be inspired to write. As you know, we're a receiving house at Blackpool Grand Theatre, so we don't have playwrights on hand. So it was really about finding a partner of who could work with us to deliver those workshops and those initial tasters into having a go at writing. And it was very fortuitous that at the moment I was looking for that partnership. Northern Broadsides were advertising some playwriting courses they were doing for young people that was arts counseling non-funded. And so I made a phone call and hey, presto, that partnership was born. And that's been fantastic because Hallam Breen, who's actually delivering those workshops from Northern Broadsides actually lives in St. Anne's. So he is incredibly local to the Northwest. So that's been fantastic. So those initial taste of workshops have taken place. Again, it was about going back into the community. If somebody's gonna try something and test something for the first time, we didn't want them them to have to make that brave step of coming through the theater doors to do that. So those initial taster workshops have happened in Fylde, in Lowther Pavilion, we had a central one here in Blackpool at the Electric Sunshine Project at the Old Electric and Fleetwood Libraries. And it was very much about using those different partner venues as well to get people interested in writing and having a go online as well, so that if anybody's got any access needs, they'll be able to do an online workshop, which will be a way of having that same information in your own home.

- [Alex] Brilliant! And so where can people find out about those online workshops?

- [Jo] Yeah, so everything will be going on our website and obviously on our social media, but if anybody wants to send an email to CreativeLearning@BlackpoolGrand.co.uk, then we can respond to those emails with all the dates and the details of things that are coming up.

- [Alex] Playwriting or writing of any kind is quite a solitary thing to do, but Shakespeare didn't always write his plays alone, did he? He did a lot of collaborative working on plays, and I always think of him like Holy Oaks style writer's team that there's something similar going on back when Shakespeare was writing his plays initially.

- [Jo] Yeah, and I very much imagine that will be the thing that'll happen in our schools. So as we said, a lot of our work happens with our associate schools across Blackpool Fylde, and Wyre. And Hallam's been in residency for two weeks all our schools, running workshops for them. And there is an opportunity that young people, teachers, and community groups can actually enter a collaborative piece. It doesn't have to be an individual writer. People can work together and collaborate to write their piece together.

- [Alex] As Jo just mentioned, Blackpool Grand Theatre had been working with Hallam Breen, Resident Director at Northern Broadsides on the 37 Plays project. I asked Hallam to share some information about his role as a playwriting mentor and to provide some top tips to help you write the winning play.

- [Hallam] My name's Hallam. I am a theater director and a playwright, and I am also Resident Director at Northern Broadsides. So I'm wearing a lot of hats in this project, all wonderful. But Northern Broadsides is a national touring theater company and we are based in Halifax, Westfield, West Yorkshire. And the company was really founded out of a frustration from some northern actors and artists about the roles that they felt that they were getting in big classical plays and texts, like Macbeth, like Julius Caesar, like King Lear. They felt that they were always, because they were northern, basically, having to play the funny bit role, the bit on the side, making people laugh, but of no real consequence. So the company was really born out of the belief that people with northern accents from Hull and Newcastle and Liverpool can be kings and they can be emperors and they can be queens. So it was a response to that, really. And over the last 30 years, we've been producing mid-scale tours with large casts of northern actors with a variety of northern accents and taking classic plays all around the country. As Resident Director there, I do a variety of things. So I've been looking after the show on the road, but also I do a lot of community work now on this side of the year. So co-running a writer's group for people seeking asylum, running a developing writer's scheme with emerging writers from across the north, and just whatever else people come to us and say, "We want workshops. We'd love to do some arts activity." I help facilitate that.

- [Alex] So what is Northern Broadsides' role within 37 Plays, and specifically with the Grand at Blackpool?

- [Hallam] Yes. So it was a happy accident really. We've, over the last few years at Broadsides, been really keen in not just producing those classical plays with those northern voices, but finding the northern voices of today and finding out what our communities want to say about the world. So we set up a scheme called "The Young Writers Forge," which is all about connecting with emerging writers 18 to 25 from across the north and giving them the tools to write a play and to have the chance to have a short play R and D with professional actors. And we got in touch with the Blackpool Grand just to say, "Hello, we do this scheme. Could you tell some people about this scheme?" And then as Jo so brilliantly said, just by through an email and said, "We have another scheme we'd love you to be involved with." So we came on board and we are just delivering workshops around playwriting as an introduction to people who maybe have never thought they could write a play before to just dip their toes in the water and go, "Oh, actually it's not scary. It can shockingly be quite fun."

- [Alex] And you've done some of those already, haven't you? How's it gone so far?

- [Hallam] It's been really, really great, actually. Just to see people turn up feeling very, very shy and stuck within themselves, thinking they can't do it, but the willingness to show up, I think, has been really fabulous. And we've had people come out with some really fantastic scenes, some really original ways of thinking about the world and some really just profound thinking as well, the kind of thing that people are maybe reticent to share in their everyday lives. They feel like, through the process of writing and creating something artistic, they can tap into that vulnerability, which otherwise they may not feel they can. So it's been really rewarding to be in the room as people have made these discoveries.

- [Alex] I can totally see that, some of those big ideas that they might be thinking about in their heads, but not really have a platform to talk about them or articulate them in any way. So yeah. Brilliant! So how did you yourself get into writing plays and directing plays?

- [Hallam] I think I did quite a lot... I was an English student and I think it's what a lot of English students end up doing. So I was a big drama kid growing up and then went to university, thinking I was an actor, met people who were much better at acting than I was, so I thought, "I'm not an actor." So fell into the directing and the writing side of things at university, and then when it came to coming out of uni, I knew I wanted to work in theater, but there were not the opportunities around that I would've liked. So I thought, "Okay, well I'll just create my own opportunity." So ended up co-writing a play for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which we took up. "It was received quite well," he says in all modesty. And we just took it from there, wrote a few more plays, carried on directing those, and have just, by hook or by crook, developed ourselves as freelance artists. And here I am now, telling other people about how to write plays, which feels very surreal, but brilliant and fantastic.

- [Alex] Well, that leads nicely on to what would you say your top three tips are for playwriting, people who want to enter this competition?

- [Hallam] Yeah, so my first tip would be to write something that means something to you, something that really gets your heart racing and gets that fire burning in your stomach. And don't worry about trying to be clever or trying to be funny or trying to write something that feels worthy. If it is those things for you, that will come across in your writing. So just trust your gut and your passion. My next tip would be to know that you are a creative person, even if you think that you are not. I've seen that for the last week. People come in, going, "Oh, I've worked in the prison service for 30 years. I can't write." And then they come out with these beautiful poetic ideas and sentences and scenes. So just trust yourself that you can do it. And I think my third tip, and it's maybe gonna make Robin's job a bit harder when it comes to directing, is just to go for it. Don't worry about writing the small, tiny thing. I always think it's great to go, if you wanna put a scene in with tap dancing cockroaches, write the scene with tap dancing cockroaches. I'm getting thumbs up from Robin, so that's good. Just be bold, be creative, write the story that you want to write. And if it's a small kitchen sink drama, fine. But if you want a fountain emerging from the ceiling, have a fountain emerge from the ceiling.

- [Alex] Those are some really good tips. I mean, it sounds like you have had some real diverse people coming to the sessions already. So I mean, it sounds like that you're gonna get some really interesting, different stories.

- [Hallam] Yeah, I hope so. And people have been really open about their journeys into that room, and there's people who come from such different life experiences and are bringing such different experiences into the room with them and sharing them in really beautiful ways. So I'm excited to see what people end up producing and what those final 37 are.

- [Alex] I am! So it's between now and the deadline is January, is that right, Robin?

- [Robin] Yes, so the submission window is January next year, January 23. So we'll open that window at the beginning of the month and then it will remain open. So you've got the month to submit your play. But don't wait! Don't wait until January. Get writing now. These things take time. But totally echo what Hallam was saying. I think, if I don't see a play, read a play with tap dancing cockroaches, I'm gonna be disappointed, quite frankly.

- [Alex] Okay, so someone's gotta do it.

- [Robin] Someone's gotta do it. Please let it be you. Come on! We're ready!

- [Alex] Come on. Let's have someone from Blackpool writing a play about tap dancing cockroaches. Thanks for listening to "The Gathering." If you liked this episode, let us know in the reviews and don't forget to share it with your friends. For show notes, links to all the organizations and initiatives mentioned in this episode, and much more, head over to www.ArtsLancashire.org.uk/TheGathering. You can also follow us on Twitter at Arts Lancashire.