

## **S7 Ep4: Ciara Elizabeth Smyth talks to Susan Wokoma**

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Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre, Playwrights podcast. With me, Susan Wokoma. And with me today we have Ciara Elizabeth Smith.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Hello.

Susan Wokoma: Hello. Thank you for joining me. You are an award winning playwright and screenwriter. Your latest play, Lie Low, was presented at the Traverse Theatre as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2023. It won best theatre script 2023. Writers Guild of Ireland and first finalist BBC Writer's Room Popcorn award, 2023. Busy year. Lie Low makes its London debut here at the Royal Court, Jerwood Theatre Upstairs. Ciara Elizabeth Smith, thank you very much for joining me

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Thank you

Susan Wokoma: in my living room. Not my living room. I don't live here. okay, so to kick us off, what is your earliest memory of theatre?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: That's a good question. I, feel like my earliest member of theatre was probably panto.

Susan Wokoma: Yes, this is a common answer.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Okay, good. even though I think in my family always liked theatre, my nanny was an actress, not professionally. I think she wants to be a professional actress, but the family needed a better wage. Unfortunately, she was sent to work in a bookshop.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: but she did am dram so it was always kind of around. But I remember going to Jack and the beanstalk in the Gaiety theatre in Dublin when I was really small, and the most incredible thing, like, a giant's arm came down from the ceiling right beside my chair. And Jack got off and I was like, I'm in.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: What is this sign?

Susan Wokoma: How old were you? Do you remember?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I think I was about five. Five or six? Yeah. It was really small because the hand was huge.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Oh, my God.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. That is incredible.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: It was great.

Susan Wokoma: Do you think. I mean, was it as simple as that? Was that the moment that you were like, I want to be in theatre, or did it come a little bit later? Because I imagine at that age, you're probably thinking, that's a giant. That's a joke. Yes. When did that happen? When you were like, I want to be in theatre?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I think, that might have happened before, actually.

Susan Wokoma: Really? Oh, my God. Well, you said that your nan was an actor, so it was around

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: It was kind of around. And, Ah, my family were publicans as well, so they worked in a bar where writers came in, and Ireland, I don't know, Irish writers came in and kind of drank, but I was like a really, really shy, child. There's a lot of video footage of me sort of hiding places, and I had a speech impediment.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: As well.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: So I was sent to speech and drama when I was, like, three. And I feel like. I know it's very early to remember, but I do remember doing it and I loved the. I don't know, just the repetition and the intricacies or the opportunity to analyse words on a page. I don't know, I just felt like that's. That was a really. There was nothing more exciting than that. I was a real nerd.

Susan Wokoma: I was a really shy, quiet child as well. I feel like I had, like, a double life, sort of how I was at home, which was, like, didn't really speak, and then at school I was like. 'ahhhh' And, like, merging those two never really happened. But having that opportunity in that space to kind of just get to grips with speech.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Incredible.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I was really lucky.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah. And it did really change, like, got rid of the speech impediment.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: And, yeah, I think it really changed my confidence on how I related to people, so I was really lucky.

Susan Wokoma: That's incredible. So what has your journey been as a writer so far? Like, when did you decide that you wanted to write? I know that you had that relationship with language really early and you saw the big giant hand. When was it that you were like, I want to write? How did that happen?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I think, I have always written in, like, different forms. Very embarrassing diary entries.

Susan Wokoma: Oh, gosh, what do we do with the old ones? Do we know?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I wish I could find it [they laugh] and, like, I don't know, little plays and short stories, but, I didn't ever really want to show anybody what I'd written because I just thought it was so embarrassing. and I was acting all along, so just in

youth theatres and wherever would have me. And I did go to college and I did a drama degree, which was really lovely. And, I think very different in Ireland than it would be, in England, certainly.

Susan Wokoma: what do you think the difference was?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Well, it's state funded, first of all, which is fantastic. Yeah. So you're not really, like, you're paying administration costs, but you're not necessarily paying for tuition fees. I also went in Dublin, where I lived, so I just lived with my parents and got on a bus. So that, again, made it really financially accessible. although, yeah, it seemed like a stupid decision at the time because no one thought you could make a career or, like, you know, I don't even think I thought it myself. but after college, I really wanted to do comedic parts and, I found that a lot of the parts I was being put up for, and a lot of the parts that there are for women, and I was kind of in my late twenties, are just somebody's girlfriend or somebody's wife or. The part hinged on you being romantically anchored, or familialy anchored, if you know what I mean. so then I decided to. There's a fantastic festival in Dublin called seen and heard, which is a work in progress festival, so you don't have to have anything, like, finished. So I had something that I wrote, and I just thought, I'm going to put it into this. And two of my best friends were actors and are wonderful. If anybody's hiring, well, they're wonderful actors.

Susan Wokoma: What's their name? Say the names.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Meg Healy. Laura Braidy. Wonderful actors. and I really wanted to work with them. They're incredible. And, so I wrote us a piece, and it was the first night that it went on in this work in progress festival. I was like, that's what I want to do. I

didn't really want to act anymore. which was a really interesting switch. And it's not that I didn't love acting. Ah. It was that I just. I much preferred writing, and that's where I wanted to put my energy. And I felt like it was a totally different level of fulfilment. I was a very nervous actor. Do you know, like, nervous beforehand? Nervous afterwards. Okay. In the middle. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Which is a lot for your nervous system, isn't it?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah. But I didn't. Didn't feel the same about writing. So then I just started showing people what I was writing, and I think it took a couple of years for me to call myself a writer.

Susan Wokoma: Okay.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah. I don't know if it was, like a permission thing or. I. I was maybe I thought someone was gonna call me out.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I don't know what I was expecting.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Conflict in the street

Susan Wokoma: It never happens.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I've never even heard of it happening. but, yeah, that's where I started. So I think I really benefitted.. Benefited as a writer from this incredible work in progress festival, because you didn't really need to know what you were doing in terms of producing anything.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, brilliant.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Didn't really need to have a designer, you know, like, because the stage could be bare and you could just do your act and whatever you wanted to do. And, it also, you were under the umbrella for the festival. and they gave you a 30 minutes slot, and they paired you with another company, so an audience member would come in for two shows. So you weren't even getting, like, an echo chamber of your own audience.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. You were literally getting people who might be seeing the other.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah. But it was. I mean, it was just.

Susan Wokoma: It sort of guarantees you an audience.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah. And an audience that's not like your mom and your dad. Like, just, people that are gonna say, brilliant.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: yeah. So I thought that was. That was incredible. I mean, if anybody could put their work on in a work in progress festival, they should.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: It's just such a fantastic, fantastic learning experience for audiences and hearing your own work.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Like, you know, the way you write too. it sounds different with people in the room. Oh, if you're in a room by.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yourself just doing it. Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Just with actors, it just. It sounds so different when there's an audience member. And I felt it was. I was really able to hone my writing a lot quicker.

Susan Wokoma: Do you think about the audience a lot when you write? Like, because I know some writers are very much like, this is what the story is, I put it in front of the audience and they can take it or leave it, which is kind of very ballsy. But with that experience of having the audience there sort of influencing you. Did you take that on when you started writing other pieces of work in terms of, like, what are the audience experiencing as they watch my work?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I think so. yeah, I am sort of of the opinion now, because opinions can change, but that, theatre is not only a collaborative medium, but it's a medium specifically for a live audience. so in a way, if I'm not thinking about the audience, I would be questioning why wasn't I working in another medium? Yeah, sure. I'm, not trying to anticipate audience reactions. Yes, because that's different. I can't

really tell what someone's taste is or, how someone's going to feel. But I, I would be probably very concerned with trying to be generous to an audience and trying to give them some work to do in the nicest way possible. yeah, because I feel like if you're not thinking about the audience, you're just sort of a body in a room just saying things.

Susan Wokoma: No, fair enough. No, I completely agree. There is that. For me. I don't write for stage but it is. There is that contract. Whenever I'm on the stage, the idea that somebody's paid a ticket and they're sitting down and they're gonna watch you, that's, responsibility. And to kind of like, I don't know, make audiences deliberately feel. I mean, discomfort is an important emotion that we should, you know, embrace, I think. But I do think there is that contract when you're in a space and the door is closed. Totally. There's a responsibility and there is a care for your audience. I think.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I think you're so right, because, I always think about someone's journey before they get to the theatre. They had to make a decision either to buy a ticket or they were bought a ticket. They have to, you know, come out after work, they have to put pants on, they have to get a bus, they, ah, you know, they have to park their car, they have to get a number. Like, it's such. It's such a win to get people in the door.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: And regardless of whether, it's their taste or not or, you know, sometimes I think if people hate theatre, it's not really about pink.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: But I think, Yeah, I think it's important to think about them. And I

think the play that I wrote, Lie Low I think that has a lot of discomfort in it, but, I did attempt to do it with as much care for an audience, and to make it, ah, maybe as thought provoking or as conversation provoking as possible.

Susan Wokoma: We were going to talk about Lie Low in a little second, but just before we get onto the play, did you always have a strong sense of what you wanted to write? Like, as a writer, do you feel that, you have a kind of mission statement of the themes that you want to explore? Like, for instance, for me as a screenwriter, it took me a long time and a lot of commissions before I was like, oh, this is what I want to write. So how has your relationship been in terms of what you commit yourself to as a writer?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah, that's a good question. I, think when I started. So my first play, was in 20, 17, I think. So when I started, I was very much concerned with trying to write complex and comedic parts for women, that were not anchored by, yeah. Being someone's wife or mother. And, not that they were bereft of that, but that wasn't their defining quality as a character. I really was interested in writing comedy. So that's. My first couple of plays were, like, absurd, high energy farces. And I feel like that has changed, obviously. Yeah. but I'm less sure now of what, like, what my. I suppose mission statement is a really good word or good term, but I think, my main goal is to not, bore an audience who have taken the time to come in. I think I'm, Also really interested in seeing characters that. I mean, everybody says this that we haven't seen before or seen them in ways, that we haven't seen them before. yeah, I feel like I'm still kind of, coming to terms with what it is I like or I love. I do really like playing with form, like absurdism and surrealism. yeah, I think.

Susan Wokoma: Where did that come from? playing with, like, surrealism. Like, where was that?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I think, I think it's a really good way to see a story that you've seen a million times before in a totally new light and to look at it in another perspective. And, I think it opens up the opportunity for an audience to interpret things in different ways, which I really love. and I'm really. I really love the work of Edna Walsh and I love that sometimes it just feels like an expression and I don't really need to know exactly what's going on. Like, it feels more, energetic.

Susan Wokoma: Feels very wild.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah, it does.

Susan Wokoma: It's fun

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: because it should be really fun.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Ah, so I think that's where that comes from. and also just interest in different mediums and trying to bring different, styles into theatre, which has so much opportunity for that.

Susan Wokoma: Amazing. Okay, let's talk about your play Lie Low.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Okay.

Susan Wokoma: This is a tremendous play. Exploring proof blame victimhood. It's about Faye, who's been sexually assaulted by a masked man hiding in her wardrobe. She enlists the help of her brother to help her undergo a form of exposure therapy. So tell me, where did the journey of Lie Low begin?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: so I think it started in 2021. Height of pandemic.

Susan Wokoma: This is it. What you are getting when you come to see the next season at the royal court is a lot of pandemic babies. I find it so exciting and wonderful because we're getting a snapshot of the world at a certain period, but, people's brains were thinking so expansively. So it's really exciting.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yes.

Susan Wokoma: Carry on.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: thank you. Yeah, I mean, it was a lot of, like, I don't really start necessarily with. 'I really want to talk about this.' Yeah, a lot of the time I, start with writing, like, stream of consciousness and see what comes out and, see if there's a situation or a character that I really like. And I love having actors in my head when I'm writing.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Even if I can't get them. Meryl Streep will not answer my email.

Susan Wokoma: Oh, you never know if she watches.

Susan Wokoma: This, or she listens to this.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: but I think it's massively helpful. so it was a kind of mixture of things. First of all, there's, this actor that I. Who's a good friend and, I really wanted to work with called, Michael Patrick from Belfast. and he has a lovely sort of like bounding Labrador energy. And, that's the kind of a lot of the parts that he gets. And I was like, I'd love to see you in something quite different. and then I'd been toying with an idea about, sexual harassment or abuse of power and sexual assault and the grey area around all that. For a while I kind of didn't know how to get into it without it seeming really didactic or coming down really heavily on one side, which is not something I wanted to do. I'm not saying there's no merit in it, but it's true. Just, not where my brain wanted to go. And I had worked for a theatre, that, I loved the job. but I. The artistic director was accused of sexual harassment, sexual assault. And, so I was involved in a kind of a legal case with the theatre because I had reported something. but I suppose this is all to say. I, was interested in how that played out because it was in the press in Ireland. And, I suppose it was very easy to cut the head off. Like he was the problem. There is no more problem. We're all fine. Isn't it great that the monster is gone, you know, and I just. That's not true or real. And, I suppose, when I started writing, like, I started writing a character that had, you know, been abusive to, people he was in authority over. and then I thought that's just. It would be really interesting just not to vilify that character or to demonise that character. Not to like, excuse anything he's done, but like maybe look at the reasons why he's done it or a system that's supported or just societal factors that made it very easy. and then also to take the female character, who is his sister and has been a victim, and to show maybe or to explore the insidious nature of sexual assault that. How it can stay with you and end up, causing damage in different ways.

Clip from the show: I was having nightmares, okay?

Clip from the show: That's how it started off. I kept having these nightmares. And, What would happen in the nightmares? The usual stuff. sometimes I'd be falling classic or I'd lose my voice. Typical. Or an enormous penis would chase me through a meadow full of ducks and try to insert itself into my mouth. All fairly standard, but dream interpretation is not really my area.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: So I started writing it and then I got the two actors on board and they read the first draft and it was so terrible. But they were great. [they laugh]

Susan Wokoma: All right.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: But it was incredible because, of the pandemic, I sort of had access to the actors and they were really in.

Susan Wokoma: We weren't doing much.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I mean, it was. I mean, I'm so sorry but fantastic for me. and we had a fantastic director, Oisín Kearney that was, that was free. And, so we were, we were able to do a lot of workshopping of the script and I also was able to contact, a writer, Marco Rowe, who was kind of mentor on the script, and Enda Walsh as well, who helped a little bit, which was fantastic, which I actually don't think I would have been able to.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Get these people

Susan Wokoma: any other time, really. Yeah, that's true.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah. I loved the pandemic.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: No, I'm joking.

Susan Wokoma: No, I do think there was a lot of like, you know, I know a lot of people who had their time to sit with the creative endeavours, you know, whatever it was, whether it was learning to play an instrument or writing a play. And so having that access, I feel like one thing that I definitely felt was, gosh, you know, you don't. What I felt actually being on sort of television side is, when it all paused, it was like, actors, writers, we can still play. Whereas these producers were like, what do we do now? You did kind of feel like, we'll let you know once we're done. It was just great.

Susan Wokoma: So I just wanted to talk a little bit about, really quickly about the dark humour in this play. Like, where did that come from? Because I know there's such a keenness to categorise writing, particularly women, let's just be really honest. So marrying the dark humour and something as internal as PTSD, that's going to be on stage. What was your decision around that?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: well, I think. I mean, I'm very drawn to comedy to begin with and, I think particularly when you're dealing with a subject that's so heavy and it can lay such a weight on the audience that you kind of can't do it without a comedic element or some humour or, it. First of all, it acts to give people an audience breaks or punctuation from the really, really heavy material. It also, I feel like it opens them up slightly, yeah. and, I think using comedy and then, sort of harrowing tragedy on either side of it has an audience doing a lot of, mental gymnastics. In a good way.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. Puts them to work a little bit. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Which is good.

Susan Wokoma: Let's do it. They're sat down, they're comfy [they laugh]

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: But, I think I, was really keen to have audiences allegiances kind of flip between the two characters. and, I mean, humour was a very good way to do that because it really softens a character or, like, brings the audience into them or on their side, I suppose, in one way. it's interesting, I think, when, we did the show in Dublin, my reputation is in Dublin. I haven't really done any theatre outside of Ireland. and because I've maybe done a few comedies before, people came ready to laugh, they were up for it. And I think, the comedy landed very well. But then I think people were very unsettled. In a good way.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, this is good.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: But definitely Edinburgh was a, Traverse was a different ballgame because nobody knew. Knew me or anything I'd done before. So people were. Because of the subject matter, I think audience were very, silent, maybe afraid to laugh in some respects. Like, we definitely. We did it on three sides, where we had some audience members kind of laugh and then cover their faces.

Susan Wokoma: those reactions, those very visceral reactions are so important. And, just finally, now that you've had the experience of play at the Traverse and now here, like, how do you feel about your play being here at the royal court? [they laugh]

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: It's surreal. I can't, I can't believe it. I wish I could be more eloquent and articulate than that, but I can't. I, can't believe. I don't know who I tricked to

get here.

Susan Wokoma: Maybe you're just bloody good. Maybe.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Maybe. But also maybe I'm a trickster.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, aren't we all tricksters?

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Yeah.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: I'm delighted, Ciara thank you so much for joining me, and I can't wait to see the show.

Ciara Elizabeth Smyth: Thank you so much. Thanks, a million

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