

S7 Ep3: Margaret Perry

Royal Court: You are listening to a podcast from the Royal Court Theatre.

Royal Court: Please note the following episode may contain strong language.

Royal Court: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's podcast with me, Susan Wokoma, and my guest today is Margaret Perry. Hello. Welcome, welcome. Thanks for joining me. Margaret is an award winning playwright. Your stage work includes a debut play, Porcelain, which is produced at the Abbey Theatre in 2018. Collapsible, which won the Fishamble New Writing award at Dublin Fringe 2019 and transferred to the Bush Theatre for March 2020, and Paradise now, which opened at the Bush Theatre in December 2022. It was nominated for the 2023 Olivier Award, outstanding achievement in affiliate theatre. This year, she collaborates with Katie Mitchell on, an adaptation of Maggie Nelson's Bluets, which will play in the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, right here, later this year. Margaret Perry, thank you very much for joining us.

Margaret Perry: Thanks for having me.

Susan Wokoma: okay, I'm asking everybody this to begin with. What is your earliest memory of theatre?

Margaret Perry: This, is so surreal because I've listened to every single episode of this podcast, so I knew that would be the question [they laugh] - such a nerd. My earliest memory of theatre, I think, to be honest... Well, it was, the nativity play, in which I played Mary.

Susan Wokoma: You played Mary?

Margaret Perry: I did.

Susan Wokoma: Livid,

Margaret Perry: I know, but it was. Yeah, I was very shy, and I hated every second of it. But then, yeah, my earliest actual memory is I went to see this Edna Walsh play called Disco Pigs, which is about Cork and set in Cork in a tiny theatre near me called the Granary Theatre in, like, 2002 or something. And I think I'd never seen a play about where I was from written with people speaking like I spoke and. Yeah, that really. And the language of it was so, experimental and strange and poetic, and it was really, yeah, I was obsessed.

Susan Wokoma: Okay, that is a classy... I think that is probably the classiest answer we've had, because it's an amazing, incredible play, and for that to be your first introduction to theatre is incredible. So, can you tell us about your journey as a writer? So your debut play, Porcelain, was an unsolicited submission to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. so how did that come about? How did you get to the point where you were like, I want to do this, and, then submitting your play?

Margaret Perry: Yes. I mean, it's extremely tangled up with this building. Like, it's very surreal to be here, really, because I basically, I did a degree in Cork in Drama and English, and then I kind of decided I wanted to try and be a playwright. And, I decided I'd heard of the Royal Court and I knew that that was where new plays were produced, you know, that they were interested in new plays. So I applied to the intro group ten years ago, literally, in 2014. And I got in and I decided I would move to London on that

basis. And the second day in London was, like, doing that the first day of that group, and we had to tell, like, two truths and a lie in, like, the bonding bit, you know? And one of my truths was that I moved here yesterday and everyone was like, no, that's a lie. And I was like, fully. I arrived last night and I have no bank account or anywhere to live or job. but, yeah. And so that kind of kicked things off for me. And I actually wrote Porcelain on that group.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Margaret Perry: And it was the wonderful Louise Stevens, who was in the literary department here, who just really encouraged me to, you know, she said, look, we can't do this play, but you should send it round and you should keep the faith and someone will do it. And then about five years later, it went to The Abbey Unsolicited submissions. And they rang me, like, two months later to say they wanted to do a workshop and then that they wanted to put it on, which was just absolutely miraculous. Like, I never expected that to happen. and I think I was. People always say this, but I was. I was getting very disheartened by that point.

Susan Wokoma: It was five years from when you wrote it here. And how long was, the writing group here? How long did it take to write porcelain?

Margaret Perry: It was. The group was twelve weeks, 3 hours a week for twelve weeks and then run by wonderful Leo Butler. and then I wrote a draft on that and then I did, like, so many drafts over the years, like, I would take, you know, just. I was basically just constantly working on it and trying to write other things, too, but, like, kept returning to it, trying to get it right, trying to try new things. And then there was one draft that I wrote that I was like, I had used all my holiday from work to do it and I was kind of like, this is

as good as I can get it. And if this. I'll have to put it in a drawer if this one doesn't.
Doesn't stick. So. Yeah, so that was the one I sent to the Abby

Susan Wokoma: That was the draft that went there. How do you know? How did you know that that was it. Was it just. I'm, sick and tired of writing this? Or did you feel like this is the best it's gonna get.

Margaret Perry: I think it's a very instinctual thing. Like, and, I feel like writers I work with ask me this, too, like, when. When do you. When do you push and when do you let yourself rest? And I think it was, like, a question of. I felt like I had the impulse. I felt like I had said what I wanted to say, and sure, it was raw, and I knew it needed, still needed work, but I felt like in terms of what I could do with it on my own, I'd hit my limit. And I think I just felt that. And I was like, maybe I could come back to it in a couple of years. But I knew I couldn't keep redrafting and redrafting unless I had someone, a sort of possibility of collaboration, you know? so, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So your relationship with this building is not just the group. You used to work here.

Margaret Perry: Yeah. So I also, when I moved here in 2014, I applied for, like, so many jobs, got none of them. And my play, Collapsible, is largely about that time of trying to... Having a breakdown while trying to find something that you can do, you know? and, the only job I got an interview for was the box office job here. And then I got that job, and again, I was going to leave London because I'd been here for six months. I don't really know anyone. I'm not doing anything with my days. Like, I'm depressed, I have to go home. This doesn't work for me. And then I got that job, and I was like, all right, I can stay. So, yeah, I'm very grateful to this building, and I feel very emotional to sort of have

been, have had that journey, it's incredible.

Susan Wokoma: And to also be, I think one of the things, definitely when I left drama school was like, how do you keep your foot in the creative world when you're trying to pay rent? Basically. And I know that there were points where I really suffered with that, because you're so focused trying to do that. But to be able to pay your rent in this building, it means something when you're literally just around an atmosphere of creativity.

Margaret Perry: Totally. And the other great thing about that job was the shifts were 10 hours long, which sounds bad, but it meant you could do a 40 hours week in four days, ten till eight, you know, commute on the either end. Nine till nine. That's a long day. But it's done. That meant you had three days remaining, one of which was my. Would be my, like, day off. And then the other two I would use to write so it was, it was a good structure. And also, like, when it was quiet, you could do.

Susan Wokoma: You could do a little stuff.

Margaret Perry: The, managers were always very, like, when I got the workshop for Porcelain, they rang me with, like, two days notice and I had a shift and I was like, I'm sorry, I can't get it covered, but, like, I literally have to go. And they were like, don't worry. Like, that's amazing. We'll sort it out. If you work somewhere that is in a theatre, they're not gonna have that.

Susan Wokoma: They're not gonna have that,

Margaret Perry: understandably, because.

Margaret Perry: They're like, you're my employee and you need to be where you are.

Susan Wokoma: More business,

Margaret Perry: Because they're paying you.

Margaret Perry: But, like, I think I just couldn't have had a more flexible day job than that. And I also didn't quit in a blaze of glory when I did porcelain because obviously it wasn't enough money, but I went to part time and I eked out that money, and then I went to three quarter time and then I went to, like, a day or, here and there. And then in the pandemic, sort of like, yeah, swerved.

Susan Wokoma: Swerved. That's. I wanted to ask you about what your process is, and it seems like the job here gave you that structure, which I think a lot of writers sometimes struggle with. So was it, were you extremely disciplined in those two days, and would you be working on a, lot of ideas, or was it just porcelain?

Susan Wokoma: At the time,

Margaret Perry: I, was working on Porcelain, and then I was also working on my play, Collapsible, when I had sort of put porcelain down and it wasn't. I'd started the new play, and I guess I was also applying for stuff, like every competition under the sun. I did a lot of scratch, short nights, like the miniaturist, those kind of things. Yeah. but, yeah, I think I was pretty disciplined. I weirdly have realised this is more personal life than anything, but the last few years, the last two years, really, I've been more relaxed and been able to do fun stuff. I really think I spent my whole twenties, like, wanting so desperately to be a playwright and also to try and make rent that those are, like, my

priorities. And I actually. There were other areas of my life I sort of probably didn't. I don't know, I maybe didn't have. I had some fun, but, like, it was. Yeah, I was. I was pretty. Pretty dogged about it. Yeah. and obviously that doesn't always pay off. Like, plenty of people work unbelievably hard and it doesn't happen. So I just. It's just such a weird lottery winning feeling to be able to do this.

Susan Wokoma: I feel like a lot of it is not giving up. I feel. I always say that with acting, it really isn't a numbers game. It's like you've just got to stay in it, which is really hard because staying in it requires inspiration. It requires you, having extremely thick skin. But also being thin skinned is exactly what people hire you for because of your access to vulnerability or whatever. So it is. It is really just kind of like finding the motivation to not give up.

Margaret Perry: Basically, and also privilege. I mean, like, you know, I've got middle class parents who ultimately, if I really couldn't pay the rent, they could probably help me out, you know, and that's a safety net that, like, so many people don't have. That makes me so angry that it's that hard to, be in it and that.

Susan Wokoma: Well, I think it's. I think it's really important that you mention that because for a lot of people, you know, we lose writers because they go, I can't do that. And for you to be in that position and possibly get that help is a beautiful thing. Goodness. I think that if anyone could have that, that's like, nothing to be, you know, talk down. It's wonderful. so did you always know what you wanted to write about? Like, do you as a writer have. You know, when you go and see playwrights and you see their work, sometimes there is a very clear voice or a very clear theme in all their work. Do you have as a writer your mission statement? Is there anything that you're like, this is what I do, or is it a play by play sort of basis?

Margaret Perry: I don't know. I think I'm very interested in, like, interior life and subjectivity. And I think, like, I had a writing teacher once who was like, if interior conflict is what you're interested in most, like the battle of the mind, you should be a novelist, not a playwright. And I always sort of took that as a challenge. I think with Collapsible, it was very much trying to, like, be inside a mind. And I think with Bluets as well, it's been a kind of. That process has been, You know, I've been very inspired by things like Beckett. It's not I. Beckett is one of my. My favourite writers because, you know, we are just sort of placed inside that mind. And I think, like, yeah, I'm always drawn to writers. there's this quote that I love, which is Carol Ann Duffy, the poet, talking about Virginia Woolf, and she says that Woolf writes in the language of what life feels like. And I feel like that is something that I try, would want, aspire, to write like that. Just saying, like, this is what this thing, this topic or this person or this experience feels like to me in this moment, in this place or.. you know.

Susan Wokoma: It makes so much sense because the choice to adapt Bluets seems like such a challenge, such an incredible challenge. Now, how did this. Before we go into what it's about and you trying to describe the book, how did it come about? Was it something? Did you read the book and go, I want to do this? Were you approached? How did that come about?

Margaret Perry: Well, I mean, again, this building. So I did it. I did a writers group here in 2019, one of the language groups that was run by Alice-

Susan Wokoma: Alice Burke.

Margaret Perry: Exactly.

Susan Wokoma: So this is like the super group. Is it called a super group?

Margaret Perry: Well, jokingly, we were told it was a super group.

Susan Wokoma: This is a super group. It sounds like a cult [laughter]

Margaret Perry: And then a WhatsApp group was set up that was called the Unsupergroup. I don't know. I was like, I don't really. I don't really care, but I don't really. It's a weird. It's a very weird thing... A weird way to describe it. But it was amazing. It was a year of 3 hours a week with Ali and Alice, two of the most beautiful and amazing writers and people like that we have. And, Yeah, and that was really transformative for me. not just because of the writing, but just also because of Alice's, in particular, is, like, amazing encouragement of me, which I'm so grateful for. So actually, she sent Porcelain, my first play, to Katie Mitchell during that group. And one day, really casually, she was like, I sent your play to Katie Mitchell. And I was like, you've done what? Like, which draft is it? Is there a typo?

Susan Wokoma: That's the first question. Which draft?

Margaret Perry: Like, what?! So anyway, that happened and I was like, fine. You know, I heard nothing and whatever, I was, like, moved on, forgot about it, and then probably didn't forget, but, you know.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, I forgot about it. Sure [they laugh]

Margaret Perry: Right.

Susan Wokoma: You didn't forget about it

Margaret Perry: every night 'has she read my pay yet, has she read my play yet'

Margaret Perry: But,

Margaret Perry: But, yeah. And then, last summer. So that's nearly four years, three years later.

Susan Wokoma: Wow.

Margaret Perry: Katie emails me completely out of the blue then. We've literally never spoken in our lives and was like, hello, would you be interested in adapting Bluets? Sincerely, Katie. And I was like, it was a crazy email to receive. Yeah, I was like, oh, my God, a thousand times, yes. and then when I met her, I really had to, I thought I was an interviewing for it, you know? So I'd come in with my kind of, like, prep of why I love the book and why I love her work and, you know, what I would do with the book, all of that. And she was basically like, cool. So, this is a schedule, and we're gonna begin this and this and this. And I was like, what? And she was like, she said to me, she looked me down in the eyes and she was like, I've asked you to do this and you've said yes, so be secure in that. And I was like, all right, then what I will was kinda like, oh, well, that's like ten years of therapy that I could have not had.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. [they laugh]

Margaret Perry: Yeah, that, was really nice. And, yeah, she's, it's just been such a dream to work with her. Like, I'm such a huge fan of hers and, like, with two plays she's

done with Alice here on this stage have been, are sort of two of my favourite theatrical experiences of my life. Like, and, yeah, I am, yeah, it's been amazing. but that was how it started. She came to me and I had read the book. It wasn't like I'd read the book and loved it and I'd actually returned to it.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Margaret Perry: I had moments in my life when I'd needed it sort of over the last. I think it's 2009, it was written, and I read it maybe 2013 for the first time. So I knew it and I was really familiar, but I hadn't thought to adapt it until Katie was like, let's do it.

Susan Wokoma: So we'll come back to Katie in a minute because that's huge. But so with Bluets when you read it, so you just read it as a punter, like, you just read the book separate to getting the bat signal from Kate Mitchell Was there any bit of you that read it and went, oh, yeah, a play.. theatre?

Margaret Perry: No, no. and I think that's kind of why it's exciting, because I think things that feel like.. it's often the things that don't feel like a natural adaptation, and you find this in screen as well, that make the best adaptations, because if something feels like, oh, I can completely see how that would be. It's too easy in a way. So I think, like, yeah, it's been fun, it's been hard, but it's been a, kind of fun challenge.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. Okay, so Bluets. Bluets is a meditation on love and grief, told through a series of propositions or fragments documenting the colour blue. I mean, that sounds like an absolute Rubik's cube to adapt for the stage. So you've told us how Bluets came about and have you always wanted to adapt a story? And how has that experience been, you know, when the beginning, middle and ending of something has

been laid out? What is that journey like in terms of what your process is? So you have the two days a week that you would write porcelain. How has that differed from. From writing bluets? Adapting bluets?

Margaret Perry: Well, my whole working life is different now because I'm full time writing, so that's.

Susan Wokoma: Congratulations.

Margaret Perry: So, that's one different. I don't have just the two days anymore, thankfully. But, yeah, I mean, I think I've never adapted anything for the stage before. I think I'm doing a few different screen adaptations, but, yeah, I hadn't. It's a different thing, definitely. And I think, like, well, the first thing I did was type. Typed up the book.

Susan Wokoma: sorry, like, typed it up?

Susan Wokoma: You typed up the whole book?

Margaret Perry: Yeah, because I was like, the only way to get the rhythm into my body is to type it up. So I did that. You're looking at me like, that's an insane thing to do.

Susan Wokoma: No, I mean, listen. No, as you say, it makes sense because then you've got the whole book on a screen as opposed to you're doing cross reference. But how long did that take?

Margaret Perry: I did it in, like, my evenings in the last, like, in like, October, November. It took me, like, about three weeks, I'd say. But, yeah, like, not, I've not full time three

weeks, but, like, yeah, just picking up, tipping away at it, kind of.

Susan Wokoma: Wow.

Margaret Perry: Because I'm always working on so many things at once. And it was also, in a way, a really relaxing thing to do because it was like, I'm not actually, I'm not really writing here. I'm just typing, you know?

Susan Wokoma: Right, okay, fine. Your brain is just like, you're like a secretary.

Margaret Perry: You're like, I actually, I do that frequently with other people's work as well. When I'm trying to get into my own work. If I get stuck, I'll often go and I'll type up, like, a Sarah Kane play or some bits of, like, an Alice Birch play or plays that I admire. I'll just type them up because I'm like, oh, it sort of gets you started if you're a bit stuck, I think. And also then you have the rhythm of. You don't want to, like, overly. It's not like you're trying to copy them, but it just like, it's like a benchmark for you, for yourself.

Susan Wokoma: So you hang on. So I. Whoa, whoa, whoa. Everything. So this isn't just the case with Bluets. you. When you're feeling kind of stuck, you will write. You will literally type up other writers plays. Is it something about when you type, sorry, my brain's going as well. When you type their words in the dialogue, is there something that sort of connects you to where they possibly were as they were creating it? Is that what it is? Or is it literally just like a meditative, relaxing thing? Like, what is it?

Margaret Perry: Yeah, it's a bit of both, I think. Like, it's sometimes starting is the hardest thing with writing. And if you're sitting down and, like, all the blank page is staring at you, all of that stuff people always talk about. But, it can be like, okay, I'm.

You're kind of like a way to trick yourself into getting going. You're like, I'm not gonna do any of my own writing. I'm just gonna just do a little bit of this. And then suddenly you're like, oh, actually, I now feel like I could probably jump in to my play. So, yeah, yeah, it can be. And also, if there's bits of text that I really admire in particular, like, typing them out helps you see how they've been put together and you can. Yeah. But with *Bluets*, it was kind of essential to type it up, especially now, because when I can just go to the document and search a word and find a bit of text that I need. And it would have been really annoying if every minute I'm picking up the book being like. Because the adaptation is, like, very faithful. It's not like a, like a. The book is not a leaping off point from for my own words. It's like Maggie Nelson's words.

Susan Wokoma: Right? I did it because I've not read the book.

Margaret Perry: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it's in a way, like, yeah, it's, I'm writing, but it's her words. I'm kind of writing something that's mine using the words of someone else, which is, something I've never done before.

Susan Wokoma: But does that feel freeing, comforting or is that really difficult?

Margaret Perry: There's been moments that it feels super freeing and kind of like, lower pressure, if I'm allowed to say that. But in the end of the day.

Susan Wokoma: Some great work and you're just trying to sort of do the jigsaw puzzle of how that, is then made into a play.

Margaret Perry: Yeah. And I mean, I'm sort of in conversation with a book in a way, you know, which is lovely. And then in other moments there has been, you know, it's quite

constricting and you are dealing with another living author who has their own thoughts and feelings about, you know, this book that they. And it's theirs really. You can take ownership in the same ways as you do of your own play, but you also have to do the job well, take some ownership. Cause otherwise it'll just be kind of cold and like, you know. And so I've sort of put myself in moments. but always through Maggie Nelson's lines. She's really like quite collaborative. Once she kind of got a sense that like, we're not gonna mess up her book.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, of course.

Margaret Perry: She's kind of like cool, you know? So,

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Margaret Perry: Yeah, I think she's gonna come see it. So I'll be so nervous to see what she thinks of it.

Susan Wokoma: You'll be outside [they laugh]

Margaret Perry: Hell yeah. Yeah. Oh my God. Don't even like.

Susan Wokoma: So with. So back to Katie Mitchell. The thing that I love about Katie, this is what I say quite. I was actually talking about her not too long ago, is that the thing that I love about her as a director is that she's the kind of director who's able to show a scent on stage. Does that make any sense to you? That's kind of what she evokes, for me. So it makes sense to have this book, which is kind of really hard to pin down, like part memoir and then, you know, this kind of story. So is there, if you were to try and

describe Bluets to an audience with what you can say, how would you describe the play?

Margaret Perry: I, would say it's a sort of mood driven piece, about a woman who has experienced, the loss of someone I think she felt would be her life partner. And at the same time, the, ah, pain and grief of a friend, who has an accident and kind of trying to piece those things together while also distract herself and console herself by collecting blue items and the words of, other, authors as well. Like kind of turning to art for consolation really, is what she's doing.

Susan Wokoma: So beautiful and such a. I mean such a. Did Katie talk about how she came to Bluets and wanting to, put that on stage?

Margaret Perry: Yeah. I mean, weirdly. Have we talked about that?

Susan Wokoma: You talked about. You talked about how you. And how.

Margaret Perry: No, I meant had me and Katie.

Susan Wokoma: Oh, have you ever? Because actually the nature of your interaction did seem like she was like, well, I've chosen you to do this so you can do it. So, like, I wouldn't be surprised if you have no idea. [she laughs]

Margaret Perry: I think that Katie and I, I think that Katie loves the. And so do I. But there's sort of. I mean, it's a deeply feminist book as well as all Katie's work is. All my work is too. But it's, And it's partly a sort of defence. A defence doesn't need a defence, but sort of defence of female pain and the sort of validity of female pain as being like,

worthy of discussion, worthy of placing, you know, giving weight and giving, time and attention to. And that's why there's so many quotes and, references to male writers scattered through the book. And we talked a bit to Maggie about this, Katie and I, that she sort of felt like she almost felt, indulgent and like, who cares? A heartbreak. Who cares? You know? And that's kind of this sort of these is kind of a repast to these male writers who've been given so much attention.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Margaret Perry: when writing about their pain.

Susan Wokoma: That's so true. That's so completely true. There's sort of a validity, I say a lot to my friends, the amount of films I've watched, which is about a sad man walking around Brooklyn eating a pizza. And we'll just. What? And it's in like black and white and we're all go It's a meditation on loss and whatever. And the moment you do that with a female character, they're like, but what happens? There's not enough story. You get that a lot.

Margaret Perry: You do, you do. And I face that a lot. Like, in terms of when I was writing *Collapsible*, I was so scared because that's a play about a woman who, who is having a breakdown and it's not really about much else. Yeah, but, like, I was kind of like, is this allowed to? Am, I m allowed to. Is this enough? And I think even when I was adapting *Bluets* there was a sense of like, will this be, you know, does this. Can we give this the space that it deserves? And talking to Maggie about that and Katie is so bolstering who are like, bit older than me and maybe like a bit. A bit more like, yeah, fuck it. You know, a bit less kind of contrite, or kind of shrinking than you might be when you're younger. I don't know. If that's the right way to put it.

Susan Wokoma: But no, I think that's completely wonderful. And one of the things, when I saw, anatomy of a suicide, I got a real sense of, a writer, Alice, and Katie really taking their time to describe the living experience of these women. And that's what gets me so excited about theatre. I'm like, that's the difference between theatre and watching a Netflix film. It's like, I can take my time, I can live with these people and share the same air as them. And when you take that away, when you're trying to make car chases on stage, like, I love me a little bit of excitement. But also, I do think that there is something so beautiful where you can feel like, everybody's heart rate synchronising together, which is what happens in the theatre. so just to wrap up, I want to ask you, just because it's so. Your relationship with the building is just so immense, how does it feel to have your play on at the royal court?

Margaret Perry: Yeah, I mean, it's really surreal. And, yeah, I did a little scream when David rang me, but, yeah, I mean, I'm just really grateful and excited and, I don't know, it doesn't feel real. Even though I'm here during this conversation, I'm still like, yeah, is it real? I don't know. It's so exciting and I'm emotional, and I don't really know if I can put it into words properly. But, yeah, just very grateful to, like, the building, and not just to David, but Gill, but to, like, all the people, like Jane and, Louise and Chris Campbell, who was Louise's predecessor, and, like, yeah, all my, like, box office pals and, like, you know, it's nice. It's huge for me. So, yeah, awesome.

Susan Wokoma: Margaret, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast.

Margaret Perry: Thank you for having me.

Susan Wokoma: Thanks for listening to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's podcast. If you'd like to listen to more, then make sure you subscribe. If you're interested in what

you've just heard, you can book tickets for this and other plays in the royal court's new season at theroyalcourtheatre.com. follow us @RoyalCourtTheatre on instagram and @royalcourt on x. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Playwright's podcast. See you soon. Bye.