



THE FIFTH STEP | RESOURCES TRANSCRIPTS

THE FIFTH STEP | JACK AND SEAN

[Music]

Well Luka is a young man of about my age who has fairly recently joined AA or and is quite in the early days of his sobriety journey, he has come to AA more as a precaution that he doesn't want to end up like his father, his father was an alcoholic and he wants to sort of ,which is quite common with this the children of Alcoholics they want to break the cycle is the phrase they often use and so we decided that that's where Luka was in his journey we don't really know his relationship to alcohol in terms of was he particularly bad on alcohol or was it that he became dependent on it so we, I tend to just sort of go from what's in the play and so it's really it seems to be about that he had a dreadful father who had a dreadful relationship with alcohol so that's where we meet Luka and that in the first scene we think that he's probably been to AA two or three times but has still not found a sponsor which is when James enters -

And I think you've probably come to some AA meetings that I've been present at and I'm a -James is a 60-some dry probably I would imagine 35 years in my head I think he's probably relapsed a couple of times but has found his way back in and certainly been sober for a long time, some people are able to find AA get sober and then leave it and steer their own path others become quite dependent on the structure and the discipline and they've probably got an addictive personality on many levels not just alcohol and I think James has found solace in being a member of AA and going regularly and also as an as a senior dry recovering Alcoholic you are often encouraged to become a sponsor which is like a mentor to somebody who's joining.

So I think we kind of imagined in rehearsals that James has probably been to the meetings that Luka has been to maybe he's spotted that he needs somebody I want to look after somebody or maybe somebody said there's a guy over there Luka, James why don't you go introduce yourself to him and see if you could be any help that's kind of how we imagine the start of the play happening isn't it yeah the first time I think they're probably in a room by themselves- by themselves.

We had a very short window rehearsal period like a very, sort of extremely short normally you would have anything between four and eight weeks you know on average we had two weeks plus then a week of tech, so we knew all we had to do basically all Sean and I's job was to do was to turn up knowing as much of the script as we could, but there's only so much you can do of that on your own Sean and I were finding that as soon as we got up and started doing it, is that it sort of went out of your heads a bit because you'd been running it in isolation or with our partners or whatever and cause we sort of had to quick step everything you would do a table read for about a week you know like sit around and talk about all the themes, then you would get up and try to sort of see what what's happening in the scenes then you would do blocking we had to do everything sort of at once we were we were running before we could walk which meant it was sort of living on a in a place of sort of like this could fall apart any minute-

particularly for a 60-year old man-

You're not that old Sean, you are 60 right yeah-

but I'm just I did I did used to turn to Finn and him and say one day you'll know what it's like to be 60 and have two teenage children because the brain is slightly more slow to pick up the lines, he learned his lines incredibly quickly I knew the lines but then as you said it was having to run before you kind of jogged it and also there's a very big difference and I always think this whenever I'm learning any

character there's a very big difference between knowing what the line means and why you say it, and the first thing you do the table talk bit that actors do be it a new play or a classic play is you work out what it all means and then the scene and what where the scene is and how the scene pivots within other scenes and then your job as an actor by yourself and then with the other actors and director is to work out why you're saying things because of course when you read something you tend to assume that that is the truth when you're reading it but of course people aren't telling the truth and it's working out when they're telling the truth and when they're not telling the truth, once you start reading it the the different avenues you can go down with the slight tiny little denials I also the way it's written there's a there's a there's a play called David Mamet who is is an amazing American playwright and I just found out that David Ireland. is a big fan of his and I said to him it's like Mamet he oh that's interesting because I like Mamet and the punctuation in David Mamet or to some extent somebody like Pinter or Beckett there is dot dot dot commas one line dot comma, something and so the actor has to listen to the music of this thing but in learning it quickly you can get that wrong. There's at one point there's a scene where I think I have five different ways of saying okay in one page which is a really interesting challenge and you've got them we've all got them so you know just we all say okay but then you can also say okay, okay, you know and David's play is well that's that's the skeleton of it isn't it and it's fascinating it became quite evident quite quickly actually you know that a very useful way of thinking which I think is sometimes useful in any play to think of but what became very useful for this was because there's six scenes because it's a two-hander is sort of thinking right who has the power in this scene when does the power switch does it switch during the scene or is it with one person for the whole thing and it was very important for us to establish when those power shifts were and that we both knew when they were because because we've only got ourselves Sean and I to rely on that was the thing that came up quite a lot in rehearsals where we were like you know Finn would think that the power shift is here I would think it was there, Sean would think it was there and you know normally I think in plays you can do that where you can all have different ideas of when certain moments are but it it became evident quite quickly that it was useful if we could all get on the same page with when those moments are purely because David's writing is so rhythmic and he writes crescendos and he writes like you know little timp fucking drills that are you know building and building and building and he writes he writes for his words just to be spoken and so we had to occasionally kill part of ourselves, Sean and I that wanted to take things in a different way or try different things out and ultimately there there is this literal script that we have to stick to we also didn't have time to do that if we want exact exactly and we didn't have time so we sort of had to fast forward through the bit even when we go right let's try it like this for a day like we didn't have time we had to sort of try and get to the optimum thing in each scene and so we went through every scene and and and most scenes it's fairly clear now as to where who's got the power and it definitely changes in scenes as well as scene by scene number five in particular is very interesting for the sort of massive shift round of who has the power, one person's under the cosh and then the next person's under the cosh, and it's so enjoyable to play and that and it's like the bit that you just mentioned in the last scene it's sort of you think it's going to go this way but then it goes that way and you you kind of give the audience their cake and eat it as well and it's a wonderful exercise this play in execution of something as well as you can try and execute it as well as you can and serve it as well as we can and Sean and I as actors have had to shoot bits of ourself where we'd want to subvert it and there was points with Luka where I was sort of trying to question how intelligent he is because I couldn't quite believe that there was guys at 30 years old that would say lines like Luka says like pussy on tap and things like that I'm like none of my mates talk like that but there are guys at 30 years old that do talk like that and so I had to sort of work to get myself and and give myself permission to say things like that where it wasn't just somebody that's like an aliens just landed, but sometimes I think of Luka like an alien in the first couple of scenes like an alien that's landed and he's like what sometimes it's the easiest way for me when I get a bit caught -

I just thought of something actually that's quite interesting that I might be wrong be for David to say but in a way also he starts the play with giving the audience a certain tableau that is not necessarily a cliché but it is a this is my two little protagonists and this is where I'm going to set them up for you and yes they've done a very good job of making them completely real but I'm they're going to give

you in the first two scenes an enormous amount of information and then after you've got that they're now going to start being shifted around with other little bits of information that I throw in all be in it a witty and subversive way that makes the play take over that's what we discovered with the , I'm not saying I want to go back and have longer rehearsals but what would have been nice is to have had an extra week where we didn't have to find that out in such a rush because you know it was tough there was a couple of days where I didn't know where I was coming or going and I think Finn and Jack knew that and I as you know as a 60-year old man who is a little bit of a control freak but very open to having rehearsal periods that are long don't mind not knowing whether I'm coming or going for a couple of days cause I've got another four weeks to go but I haven't, I've got three days and then we got to run it in front of the powers that be and so-

was a baptism of fire-

Luckily luckily you know we worked really hard yeah and you know the play does he's he writes for he writes for actors because because he's also an actor the director is not just an actor the writer is an actor so he's written for actors to say and once you're on the surfboard or the skis and the boots are securely fastened you can you can go down the hill.

That was always very clear from day one from Finn's point of view the director that they were going to be their own thing and also the the moments in the play where David has essentially got two men talking in a room or different rooms which is a very very recognisable thing which is an immediately accessible everybody can kind of recognise that sitting in a cafe or whatever even visiting someone in a hospital bed, so Finn was always very adamant that the transitions would be a place where the play is allowed to spin off into sort of complete make believe and weird spaces and it gets a little bit filmic so that is also where Mill s with the set design what she did with the set design was put this entire world in a cube and have there's a lot of mirrors going on there's moments with bunny rabbits popping up, I take the walls apart here and it's there's a little story I think of Luka building and reshaping the world in a way that he wants it or or finding out that he can literally and figuratively break walls down and not have to stay in this room he can come here as well as being able to see the little sort of private moments of being in gyms you know gym is such a a part of sort of being a young man in some ways you see both characters in there at a certain point and so that's a very recognisable thing and they've just done such a wonderful job of of pulling Luka in particular Luka through moments where everything gets a little bit more loopy and ethereal and-

I feel watching them as well and watching them in rehearsals and then just even want to see you step off the stage in the dance for example I just think it's so clever because it's the inner world of Luka that James doesn't see but the audience see, you know and and anybody young who comes anybody actually who's had problems with any kind of mental health or dealing with facing other people and telling them everything about themselves we all harbour secrets we all go to our rooms and talk to ourselves we all have little moments that we wish we could share but we've we've just got them ourselves and I think those moments are so I think the dance is is wonderful because when I watch it it's it's amusing it's him letting go but it's also so lonely and so it's so beautiful it's so beautiful and then also quite an important reminder to remind you that you're only watching a play it's a form of entertainment or be it also stimulant yeah because it's quite a heavy subject that okay he has has got a an extraordinary imagination and you know people do hallucinate when they're coming off drink and there's all sorts of reasons why it's totally plausible this could happen but within the context of the play it's of absurdity.

It was one of the hardest moments to sort of hone and get right was was the bunny rabbit because it is sort of so ridiculous for Luka it's all wrapped up in the dream that he has where he met Jesus in his dream and he was in Galilee and James was there dressed as a giant bunny rabbit eating an Easter egg it's sort of wrapped up in that but then it's a lovely tender moment because he's- James takes it as a sort of personal affront of like you know he's got he's too busy I don't want to be talking

you know this is nonsense and you actually see Luka pretty much begging him to stay and and and apologising which is a lovely nice moment to turn on cause you don't you don't have that yet in the play all you have is me asking- Luka asking James to be sponsor but sort of arguing with most of what his advice is and then at that point he's he's asked for him to stay and becomes actually quite submissive for the rest of that scene up until and then it changes again.

I think David's a huge fan of Jacobean tragedies as well don't you I think he loves a bit of you know if he could get away with it we'd stab each other on the stage -

yeah there was I think there was a sort of early draft where Luka killed him and then Luka died as well I can't remember how and and then we both went to heaven, there was mad versions of it, it was great and I think what David found as the very short development process and rehearsal process went on was that it's a little bit different this play to what he's normally written and that those mad mad mad explosive endings that he's had in his other plays he said himself to me is that that he realised during this the process of this play that it's a lot more sort of complex this play and actually you do start to feel for both of them at different points and that a mad mental violent ending didn't feel right.

It's irrelevant that Luka tells him that he slept with his son to a certain extent in my opinion and what it is is that he tells him something, I tell him that something that his son would never tell him, doesn't feel comfortable telling him because he obviously think looks at his dad and does think of him as a dinosaur and does think he'll be disappointed in him and it's almost the worst thing to say to James. I think it's wrapped up in homophobia but I don't think it's because his son is gay we've said this is that actually if James's son had turned around him and said Dad look I need a word look I think I'm gay, I think I might be gay, I am gay whatever I think James would be a still a bit that sort of repressed part of him will be would be a bit shocked by the fact of having a gay son but I don't think he would react in a particularly negative way overtly negative way it because he'd come to him and it's and that's where I think James is very self-obsessed in my opinion, very self-obsessed person, very vain and I think that's the ultimate delivery of his vanity is to be be the shoulder to cry on is what he likes to be and Luka takes that away from him right at the very end and the sort of violence it's almost the most violent thing that can happen without smacking him in the face and then the words that come tumbling out of James's mouth in that moment are some of the most vile things you can say to a human being, a human being that's struggling, human being that's openly said that he's thought about killing himself James tells him to go hang himself and I think the the homophobic sentiment that's in James comes out the violent sentiment comes out his anger his frustration and it all just pours out of him and he says the most horrible stuff to Luka and I think Luka can't quite believe that he has a another older man like his father in his life betraying him betraying him and letting him down and telling him that he's a piece of shit and I think then Luka, it comes spilling out of Luka because he said he's built up a few resentments during the play you know he ruined his fifth step from him and all this kind of stuff and I actually think it's the moment it's the moments is to think of this play in moments and that that human beings can react and say things in the heat of the moment that they don't necessarily mean but they all they want to do is hurt someone so they'll say the worst thing they can say and that's why I love the way the ending is is that they both just let stuff out and there'd be a world where they could then talk about it but then the magic tragedy of it is that he dies. And it's left

All that is absolutely valid and then on to add on top of that what goes on in my head is that I think that I've worked on that James has got a trigger point, he's got a trigger switch that flitches how I've used that myself in as much as again as a parent I could see that trigger of people pushing you and and you know and being a parent is by far the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in my life and so I use some of that as a sort of thing to make me think what is it is it that is is James a control freak, yes am I a control freak Sean, yes we all are but I'm not James, so I then accelerated my own memory of how I reacted to things into a place where I think James would be and that means by a trigger point means I think he has flashes of and it's all about even though he doesn't think it it's all about controlling everything probably if he went to a therapist somebody would help him say this is all

to do with the trauma of your childhood and whatever you witnessed above you or the church even because you know there are touches of whether I was sexually abused at church or whatever trauma he went through that he has buried and thought I'll put everything in boxes and I know that if I can do this box I can cope with it and so I think I'm just thinking off the top of my head but I think that's what James does and he pops the box, he's the Jack in the Box so he even it's not about him not I mean he is homophobic without a doubt but you know he genuinely thinks he does like gay people and he genuinely thinks gay people are having a great time and I think you're right in the right frame of mind had he had a decent relationship with his son maybe he would have come to terms with a son being gay and grown himself into realising he's as valuable a human being as everybody else as long as he's happy but because he's a control freak he has that taken away from him and that leads to the trigger.

Do they want to go to the theatre again and see something else and be in a room sharing it with other people and the magic that that is -

And I think this play specifically it's important for people to take away that that that in essence is talk to people whatever you're going through there is all there is someone somewhere that that you can talk to whether that is friends, family if you don't even have that you have there's organisations, there brilliant people so whatever it is that you're feeling and also whatever it is you're feeling there's always going to be somebody that you're not going to shock you know and those friends that you have family members or people you know at work or organisations or whatever that you know that it's a very important thing to have someone in your life that isn't phased by anything you say and you can't shock them hold on to those people like you'd hold on to your own children or gold or whatever because they are worth their weight.

I have one or two in my life and you can't you can't shock them and that's what David's plays do very well is teach a sort of lesson in against prudes and against people who we don't talk about that kind of stuff we don't talk about which is so stupid and dangerous, it's dangerous not to let somebody say things because if they don't say things they all do things. So talk.

[Music]

THE FIFTH STEP | FINN DEN HERTOOG

[Music]

So I first became involved with The Fifth Step through, I'm an associate artist here at National Theatre of Scotland and that means that I'm part of all of the reading groups that new scripts come through so this script from David was a commission...the NTS were looking for

looking for an idea from David and he came with this sort of a what's called a pitch document which is just basically the ideas of what's going to happen in the show without any of the script being there yet and so we read that as part of the literary meeting group and then a first draft of the script came through probably about I guess like 20 months ago it would have been January of 2023 that I first read the script which is actually quite a short time for

something to go from first draft to performance but that has been sort of characteristic of this whole project brilliantly and when I first read that script that first draft I was just like this is really exciting I haven't felt that way about a new script for a long time you know that's a rough first stab from the writer but I thought this is going to be really special I was quite keen to get my hands on it as a director because there was no guarantee at that point who would be directing it or whatever but I was like know I want a shot at this and yeah over time as I say as part of that team I was reading and feeding back notes in a way that I would do with any script I would I would read it I'd look at where the strengths and maybe some of the weaknesses were where things were unclear or where we wanted more of something perhaps like more character development to understand what the themes of the piece were to understand where the writer wanted to take the script because sometimes I think it's it can be hard for a writer to know exactly what direction to take things and so feedback was given and then once I had been brought on board as the as the director it became much more about my response to to the themes that were there and how I wanted to kind of bring them to life.

You know I think when we went into rehearsals it was like the 11th draft or something although that was it was called rehearsal draft 2 so we'd gone past draft 10, 11 and then we

we just went into rehearsal draft but it still changed there you know I think that's the thing with new plays they will change so often because you just find that once an actor starts speaking the lines it can feel you know they have a good sense actors have a really good instinct of how lines work or how a back and forth might work and with the actors on this project particularly with Jack who's playing Luca he was involved for a very long time too so he really understood the character or his take on the character so things would change throughout rehearsals and that's I think really exciting because it feels like a living thing that you're working with in the room personally I try and approach every text as if it's a new text and every new text as if it's a classic because the two things have you know are comparable in

in lots of ways you know I think often a director comes to a new work in the idea is that you're serving the the original intentions of the play whereas when you go to a classic doing your interpretation now I think both things can be true I think you know some of the decisions that I made directorially on this project were about my interpretation of the script or the situation and I think that for me as a director adds exciting layer to it I'm still serving the writer's intentions but I think David as a as a playwright is really excited by a director taking something and running with it so I was able to do that a bit with it with this on the page it's it's just two guys sitting at a table what we did with the design is we changed that a bit and so they're in different rooms and getting from one space to the other that was probably the most complex thing was like how we rehearse that sort of extra layer

and because it's a comedy like you know I think people probably imagine that in a comedy in a rehearsal room for a I mean it's a dark comedy but it is you know it is funny people probably imagine you're just laughing all the time but it's you you really have to like get the get the timings of things right and can actually be quite painful at times the kind of the intricacy of the maths of like well if you say that that line like that and then he takes a beat that will be funnier than if you just come straight in and you kind of try it so many different ways and you go no that is that funnier than that version I think that's I think if you land on that word that's fun so all of this sort of stuff which you know I think some sometimes people think there's a sort of great mystery to rehearsals but really as long as the actors are on top of their lines that was the thing with this process was like they just needed to learn their lines and then come in and rehearse it so I didn't have any sort of what's the word like there's no kind of great secrets to to my process again I'd love to say that there were I'd love to say that I would reinvented the wheel in terms of the way I rehearse but it's very much just about getting it up on its feet and finding the the most interesting and clearest way to do it but that's the thing about this play is there's sort of various moments where you're not sure who's telling the truth or so we had to talk about that about just having a shared understanding of what's real and what's not and what's true and what's not yeah I think the most important thing is backstory that doesn't change the action of the play as long as it supports what the characters are doing and what the actors are doing with the characters so that like that's a tech a rehearsal technique I suppose I have is like filling in character biography and for me that's the most important thing we talked a lot about the timeline between the scenes how many days had passed between each scene because it's a series of six scenes that aren't necessarily you know consecutive days or whatever so that's something again as a technique a lot of directors would maybe write a timeline for the whole play and I think that's useful just to know like what has passed between whether they've not spoken to each other for a while or whether other things have gone on in their lives that influences how they come into the scene so that sort of stuff but it's working with with actors like Sean and Jack they kind of do that automatically so it takes the pressure off me to kind of impose that on them they're just doing that work off their own backs really. Yeah I see myself as a director as the audience the eyes of the audience so I'm just watching it from their point of view going that's not quite it's not quite clear to me what story we're telling here and guiding it towards a kind of clearer telling of that story so that's really my process you know we talked a lot about the character's backgrounds because there's not a huge amount revealed about the characters in the play and I think for the actors it was important to know who these people were and what how they'd got into the the places that they'd got to so that was interesting that kind of I'm always interested in kind of filling out the world, world- building I suppose you call it so that's part of what I do but yeah basically then just get up and do it again and again until it's really really good.

So I think the team is really important for me you know the whole thing is about collaboration and I'm very much of the opinion that the best thing to do as a director is surround yourself with people who have better ideas than you and then just pinch them so we had I worked with mostly with people that I had worked with before Mila Clark who who's designed the show her and I have worked together for a long time and I was really she was really top on my list in terms of collaborators 'cuz we've just got a short hand and that's really important as I said this was quite a quick process so you need someone that you know is going to you know you're going to respond to one another's ideas you know if you've worked with them before you know that their work and your work work together Jenny who is the movement director on this we haven't actually worked together before but I've known her work for a long time and we've known each other for a long time so we knew that would have a a connection and Lizzie the lighting designer again we've collaborated lots of times Mark Melville the composer we were new to each other but again it's just about asking people and going do you think this will be a good combination people who knew my work people who knew Mark and really you know I would you know I'd love to take credit for everything but it really was just a beautiful collaboration and what I do take credit for is putting together that team and it was a beautiful team to work with and that's the really important thing I think is working with people who you trust and whose taste you trust and who will you know elevate your ideas for me sometimes I'm like I think it should

be something like this and you need someone to to kind of take your idea and go oh yeah I think I know what I can make that into and and and then put something amazing on stage and and yeah like it was really kind of an elite team this team which is that's what you want to put together a kind of A team

So this play was written specifically with Jack Lowden in mind so Jack had been having conversations with National Theatre of Scotland for a while about wanting to do something he wanted to work with David wanted to work with him so they were sort of brought together so Jack was always going to be playing Luka and then we had quite a a long process finding the other actor because you know it's really important with a two-hander that you get that chemistry right that the actor isn't only right for the part but is also responding well to the the other actor that they're going to be working with and responding you know to the sort of notes and thoughts that I have so we we really you know we took a long time over that process we were thorough with looking for people and Sean Gilder who's ended up playing James him and Jack have worked together several times they're good friends and so it was really about seeing that chemistry we you know we had a meeting where Jack read with Sean and I'd never met Sean before and originally we were you know we thought that this would be a two Scottish actors but actually there was something about what Sean brought and it there was this interesting dynamic between Jack as a young Scottish guy and Sean as this sort of as an older English fellow that kind of yeah brought a different layer to it and he's just you know they're both just wonderful actors and its just lovely to see two people who just get on really well and have this real this dynamic and this chemistry because I think the play you know it there's a lot of tension between the two characters in the play but you need that tension to be able to be thrown away the minute that the curtain goes down which you know these actors have brilliantly so it was in the end quite a a straightforward process to cast

With this play obviously there's it's it's really rich in lots of themes about

addiction about masculinity about faith about relationships between Fathers and Sons so all of those things really sort of sang to me from the first couple of drafts and I was just interested in pulling those out as much as we could in our design choices in our casting choices in and in the way that we kind of develop the script you know the plays about two guys in AA so there's the theme of addiction obviously this the theme of of sobriety and what happens when you give something up that has a big part of your life and and probably a really damaging part of your life what happens then what happens when that's gone I don't think it's necessarily a play about alcoholism or sobriety but it the fact that it is set or takes its starting point from AA means that there is this space where two men from different generations from different backgrounds that aren't related that don't work together have to have this connection with one another and this openness with one another that's quite challenging for both of them and so really it's about that one of the big themes I think is about connection between men and that identity and the things that we uncover about ourselves when we're talking to relative strangers I suppose in an open way and then Faith plays a big theme one of the characters sort of discovers his faith I think it's unusual for a character to kind of discover their faith in a play and for that to be a positive thing for them I think that often that's seen as another way that they are you know deluding themselves or whatever but I think what's really bold about this play is that David's written a character who actually discovers hope through a new understanding of himself through faith and that's I think that's really that's really bold actually strange as that might sound. Yeah just themes of like loneliness and disconnection and I think that that's really present in the world like I think that we can't ignore the fact that people don't they don't necessarily feel as connected as maybe they would like to or maybe they used to much as we live in this really interconnected constantly kind of online world like people are on their own in places and particularly I think young men I think we find that a lot with young men and that's why there's the rise of things like incel culture and the play begins with a touching on that idea and while again it's not something that is necessarily a strong theme through the play we always see that this this guy this character this young man he's on the edge he could be tipped at any moment into just a really really potentially dark place and I think that's important that we

talk about that I think like I think we know it's there but we tend to kind of turn away from it because it's uncomfortable scene 4 which is this sort of big centre of the play and they have this debate about faith there and we see this character he says the he says the line for the first time in my life I have hope and so I think that's really clear there but I think that what I've always loved about this play is that it's so so rich so rich in themes and so layered and so in every scene they're kind of touching on every one of the themes which feels like a cop-out answer but it's not I think like I think throughout you're going oh they're now it's about faith oh now it's about masculinity oh now it's about addiction oh now it's about loneliness and I think that's that's what life is like you know it's not one theme throughout every day you're dealing with like you know a million different different thoughts and themes so I think that play feels really the play feels really real because of that yeah I think what happens is we bit like each scene kind of builds a new argument with these themes but probably at the centre of it yeah is this is this scene 4.

The whole thing about this relationship for me was these were two characters that were trying to replace a figure in their lives like Luka I think needs a parent whether that's a father or a mother like in the play he's lost both his parents and he had a terrible relationship with his father an abusive father and so he's trying to replace that figure in his life and so James becomes that and James I think is trying to James without ever acknowledging it has has a damaged relationship with his own son and had a bad relationship with his own father and is trying to to mend his relationship with his father through his son but actually is failing at that and so then brings Luka in as a replacement for his son in a way even if he's not conscious of that and I think that is for me that is the key thing in this play is that these are people that are they're interacting as parent and child but they're doing all wrong they don't know what each other needs and actually they need to interact as two adults to get really technical there's an interesting psychotherapeutic term called transactional analysis which is all about parents and children and that you can have that relationship with anyone it doesn't have to be your parent or your child you interact on a certain level as parent or as child or as two adults or and Luka and James just can't get that right at one point James is really the petulant child who needs a parent and sometimes Luka is this sort of free spirited child who wants her parent to just comfort him or but they're just missing each other constantly and

I think that's the real kind of the crux of of the relationship in the play and you really see it when Luka starts to find his faith and find stuff elsewhere that really bothers James because he doesn't have control over his child over his child anymore and then at the end of the play really you know I think the last lines of the play are really heartbreaking because Luka just wants to be told what to do and he wants to be helped you know and that's always for me been very clear about the relationship between those two characters is that's what they want from each other

Mila and I when we started talking about the design we kind of decided that we were interested in spaces that were because these are two men that are meeting up in public they're not in their homes they're meeting up in public but they're not meeting in pubs or restaurants or anywhere where alcohol is available because they're in AA so we were like what are the spaces where people can go and meet and have a sober conversation as men again something that is unusual particularly in Scotland so we were like okay cafes it starts in a kind of AA room we decided we wanted a scene set in a park we're like what if they're on a park bench and we just kind of wandered around like wandered around Glasgow and Mila was in London and wandered around London we just looked at various places and we're like a wee cafe like that like do we want to it sort of should feel like we're looking through the window at these spots and both of us like found lots and lots of pictures online of like the corners of cafes or like the corners of rooms spaces that felt like they should have people in them but were empty and that's what we wanted it to kind of feel like is like these almost these two guys are the only guys in the world they're the only people there and that the audience should and whether or not people take this from it but there should be a kind of uncanny feeling of like where are all the other people and that's a sort of deliberate a deliberate decision that we made in order to get from one space to the other Mills designed this amazing revolve which is

just this big box that revolves around the stage or revolves in one place around stage I don't know how you would describe that but it spins around and we go from one room to the other in a way that feels again like we sort of break the reality of the scenes in between the scenes and we see the characters move in a way that they wouldn't in life essentially you know they they go they're able to go through walls or they're able to go from an AA room to suddenly being in a cafe or whatever and again this was something about like just wanting to kind of slightly feel like the reality of the play is slightly fractured every now and again to keep this sense of I guess surrealism or like hallucination almost so that there's a moment in the play where the character of James is dressed as a bunny rabbit and Luka in the stage direction it says Luka takes the the costume off tenderly and with or delicately and with some tenderness and that there was something about that and that was in the very first draft and I thought there's something about the way that that breaks the fourth wall almost one of the characters is taking off the costume of another character but they don't acknowledge it and so that was kind of an inspiration for how the design should work that like we are clearly in a theatre or in a theatrical environment but the characters and the characters use it theatrically but don't acknowledge that it's theatrical so there's also this point where the character Luka starts to break down the walls of one of the of one of the rooms and that was like an intervention into the script that we were like wouldn't it be brilliant if as the play starts to kind of fracture and the relationship fractures the space also starts to fracture and that's one of these examples of how you can read a script and interpret it and have ideas which aren't imposing upon the script but are rather like bringing themes out in a way visually or physically that wouldn't be there just upon reading

Again I don't want this to sound like a cop out but I would like them to have a good time you know and that doesn't just mean just laughing or just sitting there and going that was fun like I think anything I try to make as a director I want the audience to have a kind of visceral physical feeling and I think like hopefully this show makes you laugh makes you gasp makes you sort of sit forward in your seat like it's a thriller and it's a comedy and it's you know it's a bit surreal so I would be entertained by it I think and so I hope that the audience will be entertained too

THE FIFTH STEP |

DAVID IRELAND

[Music]

I guess you would call it a tragic comedy, a black comedy I don't really enjoy categorisations I think in some ways I think of it as a kind of, Film Noir, like a thriller, a Film Noir with jokes sometimes Film Noirs when you hear about them on stage don't really work so I hesitate about calling it that, but but yeah it's a kind of comic, thriller, absurdist, tragic, comedy.

First of all Jack Lowden who plays Luka had expressed an interest in, in working with me and I think he's a fantastic actor you know I I've loved his work for ages so I jumped at the opportunity to work with him.

I tend to write specifically for actors, I like to think of an actor and write the part around them so I thought what would I like to see him do, well I'd like to hear him use his own accent we don't he's he's often on screen he plays English characters I thought I'd like to hear him use his his own accent for a change.

He's really good at comedy and again he doesn't play comedy characters a lot but I had a, I had a feeling he was funny and because he's pretty funny in *Slow Horses* as well which isn't a comedy, so I thought I'd write a funny big meaty part for him that he couldn't resist, so yeah and then I kind of thought, I write, most of my previous plays have been about Northern Ireland and the troubles because that's that's where I grew up and and the conflict had a formative effect on me, but I've been living in Scotland pretty permanently for about 10 years now and I felt like it was time to stop writing about the troubles just this once and write about something else that's affected my life. So yeah all the sort of issues in the play are things that I personally have a connection with and a large part of my experience of living in Scotland particularly Glasgow was drinking a lot as a young man and drinking too much and then getting sober and stopping drinking and learning how to be in the world and have a social life and date without alcohol so I thought that would be an interesting, be interesting to see Jack Lowden doing that so a lot of the play is kind of based on real conversations that I had with real people although it has a sort of surreal twist to it.

Sometimes it starts with an image, with this I think the image was of a paper cup, a paper cup crushing a guy, a giant paper cup crushing a man and that was originally in the first draft of the play, that's how the play ended with a giant paper cup coming from the sky and crushing someone, crushing James and then I thought I don't that's going to be hard to do so I had to amend it slightly, and also maybe maybe NTS could afford to do it but if there was Future Productions if a small theatre company in you know Sydney or Venezuela wanted to they might not be able to do that so I was kind of thinking of future productions so yeah it sometimes starts with an image and that was an image but it's more about dialogue, it's more about the rhythm, it's the rhythm of the dialogue that I start with and I really was intrigued by the idea of Jack playing an incel trying to figure out if he was an incel cause he's not really an incel but he thinks he might be an incel and he's not really sure what an incel is.

When I was 19 or 20 I feel like I could have been an incel you know like I could have been, I was a very angry young man you know, I drank too much I had a lot of anger issues, a lot of darkness, a lot of tendencies towards depression, a lot of mental health issues and addiction problems so I kind of thought- the word incel wasn't around when I was 19 or 20 but when I heard about, when I heard that word I thought I think that's what I was but it was pre- internet, so I didn't there was no you know I didn't really know there were other other people out there like me I thought I was just alone and messed up.

So the first line of the play as I think I might be an incel was kind of like me getting into my mindset of

when I was when I was about 20, 21 and really for me the play just sometimes starts with a couple of lines of dialogue and then I make it up as I go along I don't really structure, I have a vague idea of what's going to happen I think of something big has to happen in the middle something big has to happen at the end. I have an idea of set pieces, things that might happen dramatic twists but really I kind of make it up as I go along there's not but that that can be a torturous process some writers plan everything out before they start but I find that if I can't surprise myself when I'm writing then I'm not going to be able to surprise the audience.

I suppose it starts with character but not character in terms of what they're like, like you know I don't think okay well this guy's got three kids and lives in a big house or whatever I think you know how do they talk, what do they speak, what do they say to each other what do they want from each other, what's their objective and you usually I can't really get the characters out of one room it usually most of my plays just take place in one room, two or three characters talking because starting from those couple of lines of dialogue the whole play flows. When you write two two or three characters in a room most of the time they have to have some kind of history together you know they have to have something stuff from their shared past that they can talk about whereas with this one this about two men getting to know each other and building a relationship so it would be hard to just set it in one room in real time.

Finn the director really made it visually spectacular and Milla the set designer as well and everybody involved actually the Lighting designer Mark and everything, everybody's done a fantastic job just making it look visually spectacular for what is a very simple play or or could be done as a very simple production with just two chairs and a table which is what I was thinking of.

Everybody else's visual imagination and contributions have have really turned it into something wild and spectacular and that's not really my thing, I never thought my style of writing would ever appeal to large audiences so I thought I'd never kind of get large scale productions because my early plays were like so vulgar and shocking and so on, I thought um I'll probably just be playing small studio theatres my whole life so I learned how to write for just like stuff that was just two actors, you know two chairs and that was it and that's what you know that very influenced by David Mamet, David Mamet says like all you need you don't even need the chairs you just need two people and that's it, you don't need to set at all so I try to write as simply as that so it's been a real joy to kind of see all these other things come out of it cause sometimes as a writer it's hard to keep track of everybody's you know Journeys through the play so the actors can help you keep track of those journeys and give you feedback on that and my job as a writer is to kind of synthesise it you know.

But I I don't like to be in rehearsals much, I don't enjoy rehearsals and I think it's better for the writer to to stay away really for me that's cause I used to be an actor and I would hate it whenever the writer was in the room, I would just be like I would freeze with terror about what the writer thought of me.

I heard recently Al Pacino doesn't like the writer to be in the room and I thought yes Al Pacino is right so I try to stay out of stay out of rehearsals and just let the actors get on with it and I think it's better for me and for them and then when you do eventually see it you know I would go in and see it after they've been rehearsing three, two, three weeks it's better when you're able to kind of when you have a bit of a gap from it and you're able when you're not fully involved in the process and you're able to sit back and you can be more objective about what works and what doesn't work, and sometimes you can be pleasantly surprised as I was with this one.

Cause Jack was such a a crucial part to it all it was he really drove the whole thing which is unusual most of the time actors aren't the ones driving it I don't think I've been in that situation before, I have in television but not in theatre in theatre usually you're developing a play with the director with the literary manager or dramaturg and then the actors come on board last but this was a bit different cause this time the actor was involved before the director but yeah some people sort of, there's a sort of stereotype about actors that they're sort of self-absorbed and egotistical and really are only thinking about themselves you know and that's true for some actors but Jack's not like like, Jack

is Jack is a natural producer you know like he's got his own movie production company, he has a good head for story and doesn't just think about Luka, you know the character he's playing he was also thinking about James and and really getting what what was right for the story so his help in developing it was was invaluable there was a lot of drafts of this a lot more than I would normally do, normally I would give up on a play if it was as hard to write as this one but both NTS and Jack were like really encouraging and really thought you know it was an important play and it was a great play and and we should proceed with it, but but a lot of the time I don't write on commission I just write on my own so if this this had have been something I was writing on my own I would have just thrown it in the bin, but I'm glad I didn't cause it it turned out well.

So yeah there was a lot of development weeks where Jack and me and another actor at that point it wasn't Sean, Sean wasn't involved and there were other actors when Jack wasn't available there were other actors that came in and then eventually Finn came in and he was directing it and Finn's really great on script as well so once he came in things started to get uh a lot easier too because it is quite a hard play to work out. I always struggle with endings so it was really hard to figure out like what the last 20 or so pages of this play was and what happened so their help in working all that out was invaluable but yeah really it was just about getting in the room hearing it read again and again and again, hearing people's thoughts, hearing everyone's perspectives the thing was that even though it was a very sort of masculine rehearsal room, it was very male dominated you know with the cast and me and Finn there was a lot of women involved in the development process as well and a lot of like Rosie Kellagher the the literary manager here and Jackie Wylie and Caroline Newall and so on a lot of women because it is there's a lot of misogyny in the play, there's a lot of uncomfortable ideas expressed and it was good to have female voices involved in that conversation you know um to to sort of you know make specifically me not so much Finn and Jack and Sean but but really to make sure I was saying something that was truthful you know um that wasn't just being said for kind of shock value or for a cheap joke you know to sort of keep things on track you know and I think we've done that.

I remember a a teacher in school saying to me we were studying poetry I think it was Philip Larkin and we were talking about the themes that are in Larkin and this teacher said but you know when a writer's writing they're not thinking about themes they're just kind of writing about whatever's happening in their lives or whatever they want to write about and that always stuck with me, but yeah I guess for me the themes are are certainly alcoholism and identity and masculinity but I guess I don't really think of those as themes I just think of those are things that I have a lot that I want to speak about personally like the work is always personal and subjective to me I never feel like I'm sort of objective I always feel like I'm in it you know I always feel like the characters are just parts of me or parts of my subconscious.

Somebody said that everything that happens in the first scene of a play and the first like 10 pages of a play has to be like a microcosm of the whole play and like every theme that's in the first scene has to be dealt with throughout the play and I liked the fact that the play sort of begins with the discussion of of homosexuality and then ends with that and there was something about, cause some people some people really love that part of it.

I know some people have criticised it for being homophobic which was never the intention, I didn't want to make it an easy answer by the end that oh well Luka was just gay and he was repressing and that was the answer to his problems you know cause I don't think the play is as simple as that and I think Luka still ends the play with an uncertainty about who he is and what he is but it was something about going back to the theme of male intimacy. It's kind of you could say the theme of the whole play is the horror of male intimacy you know like two men who have to be intimate with each other placed in a situation where they're forced to be intimate with each other and they're uncomfortable with it and it sort of is that that's what comes back to the end of the play when Luka says that he has this gay experience but he's not gay it's him trying to work out what male intimacy is you know like and how he how he confronts and deals with um his horror of male intimacy.

I don't know if Finn the director or the actors would agree with this but for me the big moment in the play is when they have the argument about really about the existence of God or it's really sort of AA versus Christianity which I think is at the heart of the play, you know this argument Luka starts quoting the Bible and then James starts going through all the wrongs that the church have done through the years.

I think that kind of philosophical theological argument is sort of at the heart of the play you know it's really about an ideological conflict a religious conflict so even though I was trying to get away from writing about the troubles basically this is still a play about a religious conflict you know because when I was going to AA, I didn't believe in God and now I do believe in God and that was an interesting thing to kind of talk about because again this is something it's a very secular world we live in and you don't see a lot of plays where people talk about God or Jesus like it's a real thing that people experience and it's a central thing of recovery from addiction that many people believe you need a spiritual element to it, so I really love that moment and I think it's central to the play and that's where their relationship really starts to fracture that's where they've been getting along well they've been forming a relationship they're building a friendship and then at that point that's their first big argument and that's when they crack but that's when the play really starts to spin off where James kind of loses control of Luka because it really is kind of a play about control and power and who has the control and who has the power.

I was actually very influenced by a- I've only remembered this now I'd forgotten this by a film his name I can't remember- First Reformed, was the film and it's a Paul Schrader film starring Ethan Hawk and it's about a minister who's going through a crisis of faith I only saw it once and I loved it but I can barely remember it but it was brilliant and this Minister has a crisis of faith and there's a moment in it, it's a very naturalistic film but there's a moment in it where he falls in love and he's kissing this woman and then they start floating off into space and it's sort of like for a minute the film becomes kind of magical realist and then reading about it later and the writer director had said it was meant to symbolise you know how this man's life is very stayed and boring but then when you fall in love or you or when you find God you your life just take on a magic and so I wanted this play to have that kind of thing, that it was very naturalistic it was just two men having a conversation but these surreal things started to happen which is connected with the whole themes of God and sex and sexuality and all that so the bunny rabbit specifically I just like the idea of one of the characters being dressed as a bunny rabbit at some point but that he didn't know he was dressed as a bunny rabbit and that it was all happening in the in the other character's head and I think Finn noticed this and said what he liked about it was it's the beginning point when James starts to lose control of Luka and Luka starts developing his own path going down his own path. It's where the authority of James starts to be undermined because he really respects this guy's authority but then how can you respect him when you keep seeing him as a giant bunny rabbit so yeah but it was Finn's idea I think or maybe Mila 's idea to have the bunny rabbit appear which I think is a really great moment it's really fun and really scary and nightmarish.

For me it's interesting as all watching it now cause I think there's a there's an interesting connection between Christianity and bunnies and that Easter is meant to represent um you know the resurrection and instead in our culture we think of bunnies and and chocolate eggs you know so it's like it's it's an interesting sort of there's I don't know what it is but there's something interesting in that that that Luka finds Jesus and then he also start seeing bunnies everywhere.

One of the things I like about theatre is that when it's done well it really has to mean something it has to have something important about it even if it's fun you have to feel like you're not wasting your time cause you're not just watching the telly and you're not just sticking Netflix on you have to actually leave get dressed and leave your house and get a babysitter and all that, so it better be worth your time and so I just hope that people feel like all I really hope for with any audience is that they feel like they haven't wasted their time you know like they've got something from it even if it angers them at least they've had an experience.