

## **How I stay motivated and inspired as a writer**

Leah Chillery

Like most young writers, I never really had trouble with motivation or inspiration in the early days of my career. I was always brimming with ideas, the passion to execute them and the blind faith that they would find their way into the right pair of hands. It probably helped that, since I was also an actor immersed in youth theatre, community projects and music, I was always busy. Not all actors are writers and not all writers are actors, but if they do happen to have the inclination to work in both areas, then it certainly makes for a very fulfilling career. There is always so much to do that you will rarely have time to worry about being motivated! It also makes a lot of sense creatively, since actors spend the majority of their time in the rehearsal room studying their script and trying to interpret the meaning, while as writers we spend time creating this incredible new world and ensuring the meaning is clear behind it. As a writer-actor, you are both the coder, and the code reader, and you know and understand the whole process more acutely than anyone. If you get the opportunity to write and act in something, the endeavour and the end result is even deeper and richer. However, this situation is like the holy grail for most writer-actors; dangling this carrot in front of my own nose certainly kept me ploughing ahead. Even now, I dream that one day I could

be in a position to put myself in my own production. Perhaps not a stage play, as I couldn't enjoy that objectively as an audience member, but certainly something on screen. So, it would be fair to say hope for the future keeps me pretty motivated as a writer.

I have had success in both areas with one leading more strongly than the other at different times in my life. I always leaned more towards wanting mega success as an actor, especially when young as I fell prey to the desire to be famous. Today it seems like kids want to be famous YouTubers or Instagram influencers, but back then I wanted to be a movie star. Even being a TV soap star would have done. I hoped to be a pin-up, or leading lady, and was somewhat shocked when I kept getting cast in character or comedy roles. That was coupled with the fact that whenever I performed self-written monologues at auditions, I would be asked who had written the speech and be encouraged to take writing more seriously, as if my writing talent outshone my acting. Perhaps it did and still does, but I still harbour that teen dream of shining on the big and small screen. Childhood dreams die hard it seems, which is a good thing when it comes to inspiring yourself to keep going in the face of people telling you that you would perhaps be better suited to something else.

Nevertheless, I took the hint and began writing a play for the youth theatre company I was involved with at the time. It was a fairy tale written in verse, *Rap-Unzel*. The idea came to me in the form of a song, which ended up in the finished play. Listening to music and freestyling with musically inclined fellow actors,

singers, rappers and writers was a sure-fire way to find inspiration and get the creative juices flowing as a young adult. We do far less of that sort of thing now, although I would say that this is what American-style table writing is all about. The few times I have taken part in ensemble writing sessions such as these, it has involved ordering pizza, watching other comedies and playing darts for motivation, inspiration and procrastination, respectively.

*Rap-Unzel* went down pretty well – in fact the Contact Theatre, where the play was performed, went on to commission me to write their next Young Actors play. By chance, an incredibly talented Manchester playwright called Linda Brogan saw the Contact Young Actors production and offered to help dramaturge me through my next play. She helped take my wacky super heightened dialogue and characters down several floors to a more gritty and realistic platform, and *BLUE*, my first one-act play, was born. Nothing kicks me into gear more than having a deadline, or someone to answer to. A lot can be said for motivation coming from outside of you. You only have to think about bootcamp in the military to see that, sometimes, getting shouted at will make you get the job done. Not that Linda Brogan shouted at me, but her weekly check-ins gave me the drive to do my homework, to write and make it the kind of writing I would be OK with someone (her) reading!

When you are busy being productive and surrounded by other creatives, ideas and inspiration seem to flow thick and fast. You are never short of something to work on. I was also very pro-active as a youngster. For example, I sent the play *BLUE* out to 50 different places, people and organisations which I had located in *The Writers'*

*& Artists' Yearbook* (maybe the 2005 edition... something like that!). I was listening to a lot of motivational speakers at the time, such as Tony Robbins, and they were all professing that 'massive action' was the way forward. So I took massive action alright, massive action and massive expense in paper, printer ink and postage; but it paid off massively, too. I would be so bold as to say that one single weekend's printing, envelope stuffing and several trips to the Post Office (so as not to piss off the cashier) launched my writing career. Everything that I later achieved was a result, directly or indirectly, of this mass mailout. It led to my first invite to a BBC Writers Room workshop where I got a three-minute radio play produced (and, later a full radio play commission); invites to take part in projects with companies such as Nitro, Eclipse and The Theatre Writing Partnership; and I also got my first writing agent from the tidal wave of engagement that followed this process. I cannot recommend the massive action approach enough; the outside motivation you will get from all the meetings and incoming deadlines will be enough to get you moving. However, this plan might need revising in today's email climate where it is possible that your emails may just end up in a junk folder.

The flurry of work, meetings and offers that followed kept me incredibly busy, and at this stage I began to worry that I might run out of ideas! So I started a process taken from Earl Nightingale's 1957 motivational essay 'The Strangest Secret': I would sit down each morning and try to write down three ideas. I did this every day for weeks and, later, anytime I was on a train. I ended up with oodles of ideas: yes, 98% were unusable but they were always a good jumping-off place, and I was

never short of something to talk about if anyone asked me if I had any other ideas in my back pocket. Which, by the way, they always do!

I liken that wonderful stage of my career to beginner's luck, not that I am demeaning my own talent. I know that people within the industry don't do favours and they certainly don't invest time and money in people they don't think are any good. However, in the beginning, I was bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and full of hope. Just like I had believed that I would be an award-winning soap star on the cover of *Marie Claire*, I also believed that I would be the next Ricky Gervais. I would have the million-dollar idea of the year in which I would play the lead, it would get made, be a hit and I would leave humanity behind. The problem was that whereas you have control of your own output, you don't have control over the industry's. I soon came up against disappointments, rejections, setbacks and even worse – limbo: the place where no one makes a decision, or the decision is that they decide not to tell you the decision. Producers, directors, managers of companies I was working closely with, suddenly left their positions. I never knew it was possible to develop abandonment issues in your twenties, but it is. How do you keep going when it looks like maybe your beginner's luck ran out? Well, I happen to think if it's your calling, you don't have a choice but to keep going because your damn dreams keep calling, even when you change your number.

So now you're sort of trapped in this world of your own making. You are a writer and yet your writing avenues have more roadworks than the M1. You have to keep writing even when you don't know if you believe you will 'make it' anymore. Why?

Because it's the only thing you are good at, the only thing you know. It doesn't help that as you get older, you just don't seem to care so much about things going on in the world, either. I used to have lots of opinions on things – popular opinions, unpopular opinions, opinions on other people's unpopular opinions. I had love stories, hate stories and conspiracy theories. I had super gritty realistic openers and twisted sci-fi endings. I had dramatic dialogue and sitcom wit. I had characters coming out of my ears. I was chock-a-block full of creativity and the enthusiasm to pull off all-nighters to get those blocks committed to paper. I was privy to all sorts of gossip, secrets and rumours which would get the creative cogs turning. But as you get older you don't care for idle chit-chat anymore. There are no freestyling sessions with my creative counterparts. Many of them aren't even in this industry anymore, or else have lost touch over the years as adult responsibilities have taken hold. Lack of connection can be very demotivating; it's important to continue making new creative buddies, especially as older ones fade away.

Trying to be a positive person means that I don't watch the news if I can help it. I get my news via word of mouth. In fact, I am so discerning about what I put into my mind that I often worry if my mind has enough fodder to make any ideas out of at all. Therefore, I have to put in a little more effort than I used to. I can no longer afford to wait for creative lightning to strike. I have to will it to happen. This is somewhat tricky if, like me, you believe that ideas are downloaded from some mysterious creative force that we can't really control. That said, I have enough experience to know that we can at least create the right environment to attract this creative energy. We have to be pro-active in cultivating and nurturing ideas,

or else be stuck recycling things from days gone by – something which, by the way, has its time and place. Older writers still have lots to say, even if it's not blazing a hole in our soul like it once was.

I like to think that I take a more mature approach to my career these days. I have spent a long time figuring out what I want and don't want to write. I have spent a considerable amount of time working on things I didn't want to purely for financial reasons. As I have got older, I have decided that life is too short to do this. Mistakes must be learnt from, and boundaries must be put in place. As a youngster, I didn't have the confidence to speak up or stand up for my vision as I do now. I would get persuaded to change things which were important to me or be asked to deviate from the heart of what I was trying to say. Don't misunderstand me, notes are a critical part of writing, and I welcome constructive feedback... but there were times I knew that I was right about certain elements of my work and I didn't defend them. From conversations with other writers, it seems a common thing to have to go through, finding your feet, your voice and your own personal integrity. Valuing these things over money or just getting something made comes with experience, understanding, and maturity.

In conclusion, motivation came very easily when I was young and when things were going well. It's the times when things get difficult, when you hit roadblocks or just plain run out of steam, that you have to dig deep for motivation. External motivation is important and this is where having creative networks come into play. If you don't have a deadline or a producer breathing down your neck, then even

having a friend to be accountable to can be enough to keep you afloat. However, when the chips are really down, you need to be able to count on yourself to pull up your own bootstraps and keep going. In practical terms, I do this by creating a habit of writing daily. I refuse writer's block. Writer's block is a luxury. I write anyway. I do the Morning Pages exercise from Julia Cameron's wonderful book *The Artist's Way*. I brainstorm ideas often. I collect these ideas in a document. I recently began using social media to network, discover and share opportunities. I share what I know with others by doing things like interviews and workshops etc. There is something in paying it forwards, and in sharpening your skills by discussing them. There is something motivating in being a part of something bigger than yourself. As a self-employed person, I need to run my writing (and acting) like a business. Learning about business and how it pertains to you can also be inspiring. We are living in very exciting times. The world is a smaller place because of the internet. More people have the chance to be entrepreneurs, doing what they love for a living: there are far more opportunities to get known for what you do, there are far more channels through which you can get your work made, digital streaming has made room for more international and particularly transatlantic crossover, social media makes it easier to become a brand. It is a very motivating time to be alive... never mind a writer.

### **Leah Chillery**

Leah Chillery is a graduate of the BBC's College of Comedy where she story-lined on *Two Pints Of Lager And A Packet Of Crisps*, *Grown Ups* and her own sitcom pilot,



*Ebony's Yard*. She has written four BBC Radio 4 afternoon plays – her most recent being *Losing My Penny*.

Leah co-wrote the Bush Theatre hit *50 Ways To Leave Your Lover* which returned for a second season as *50 Ways To Leave Your Lover at Christmas*. Her play *Earl of Mo'Bay*, which premiered at the Lakeside Arts Theatre Nottingham, was shortlisted for the Alfred Fagon Award.

Leah is one of the first Felix Dexter Bursary winners, completing a comedy writing apprenticeship with the BBC. During that time, she developed her own sitcom *White Washed* and also gained experience on shows such as *Newsjack*, *Famalam* and *Mrs Brown's Boys*. She wrote the screenplay for *Samuel's Trousers*, a short film released in 2020.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

© Leah Chillery