

Jack of all trades, master of... Shut up!

Nathan Bryon

I'm a multi-hyphen creative (that means I do lots of different things in the creative industry) but for the purposes of this piece I'm going to talk mostly about the different types of writing that I do.

Here are a few of my hyphens: I am a writer, actor, producer and director. I have written for TV, film, theatre, virtual reality, radio and picture books. I have also acted on stage and in TV and film. Now all that just sounds like I'm bragging and dammmn did it feel good making that list, but this isn't me blowing my trumpet, it's actually the opposite! This now is talking about my relationship with the phrase 'Jack of all trades, master of none' and how it relates to my writing.

'Jack of all trades, master of none', according to Wikipedia, is 'a figure of speech used in reference to a person who has dabbled in many skills, rather than gaining expertise by focusing on one'.

Now, as I've already hinted, your boy is a top dabbler and people have always tried to sway me away from trying to do too many things by saying shit like...

'You have to understand writing for TV is a totally different set of muscles.'

'Maybe you should just master writing plays first before you try to write for radio?'

'You're an actor, don't spend so much time worrying about writing, you don't need to do it all.'

I have always been quite susceptible to people's advice. You know when your parent would say to you, 'If your friend told you to jump off a bridge, would you?' I'm always like... 'I dunno, depends why they told me to but yeah, probably?' So, after being told over and over as a young creative to stick to one thing and try and master it, I did genuinely try. The first thing I tried to master was being a playwright. I was in the theatre non-stop; watching plays, reading plays, enjoying some amazing plays and also enduring some DRY plays and loooooong three-hour plays. I was learning to write plays with the incredible Simon Stephens and Bola Agbaje, and I would put my work in for 'scratch night' performances of new work at any chance I had. However, I was hitting a brick wall; my plays were getting read by some theatres and I had a couple of commissions, but they didn't get produced, which is always heartbreaking.

Rejection hurts, but it's part of the game. Getting knocked back initially made me feel like maybe playwriting wasn't for me. At this time I must have written two plays, so I really should have just chilled the hell out, but the problem is I am the sort of person who tries to run before I can walk and then I get really frustrated when I can't. Also, I saw other writers get their first plays commissioned straightaway, and if that wasn't going to be me then maybe being a playwright wasn't for me. Looking back, I realise that was an awful reaction to have; you shouldn't look at other people and compare yourself, but sometimes that's easier said than done.

So, during this time I was trying to find work fast by shopping around a kids' TV show idea I had. I went to the producers of the kids' show *Rastamouse*, and they bought my TV show idea and then one of the producers, Greg Boardman, actually commissioned me to write an episode of *Rastamouse*. This was the first thing I ever had produced. Kids' TV is incredible in England, there are SO many opportunities for new writers as a series can sometimes have up to 52 episodes.

A few years after the initial rejections I was super lucky as, even though neither of the two plays I had written had been produced, a company called Paines Plough got a copy of one of my plays and said I had potential as a playwright. They brought me on as a 'writer in residence' and that totally changed my life as it allowed me to delve deeper into playwriting. The thing that I learnt was that your play may not get produced, it may get rejected, but it may open other doors for things, so never throw away your work even if it falls at what seems like the first hurdle.

I would always go to different workshops to try new things. I think it's something my mum has always pushed me towards. When I was younger, I even ended up in ballet classes, and I carried on this trait of trying out new things as I got older. I would save up the little money I had and try all sorts of courses. I even did a presenting course, and a stand-up comedy course for 10 weeks which was incredible. I did a few comedy gigs but wasn't sure I liked how much of my life I would have had to dedicate to it and all the cross-country travel. I tried spoken word and did a course in that, too. I did loads of gigs and even started to record an EP of all my poems, but again it never amounted to much immediately.

Chasing immediate success is always going to end up in pain as no success is immediate and nor should it be. Luckily, I never quit trying to tell stories because the more I worked and spoke to other writers, the more I learnt that you have to be in this for the long haul. The more you write, the better you get. You have to learn to save your money for a rainy day, and you have to have a lot of plates spinning at once so if one falls you don't have to start all over again, you're on to the next.

All I've ever wanted as an artist is for people to see my work, and I've never concerned myself with how they see it, as long as in some way they hear the story I'm trying to tell. I find nothing more frustrating than my work just dying on the page, especially when I know some of it is REALLY good. One of the biggest things I've learnt is that you learn the most from your work being received by an audience; the good, the bad and the ugly – it all helps you get better.

So that desire to have my work seen is another reason that I was constantly trying new things. YouTube was (and is still) an amazing platform; when I first started writing, me and my friends would film comedy sketches and upload them. Some of them were terrible, but it was a great way to create quickly, share with people and get feedback. Our sketches on YouTube never went viral and we didn't get huge subscription numbers. However, I was into sketch comedy at the time and I had been geeking out on all the greats, like Morecambe and Wise and Dave Chappelle, so I thought, maybe this was my calling. Me and my writing partner at the time decided to create a sketch comedy pilot and screen it. The pilot was good; we made it for 500 quid and at the time we thought it was the greatest comedy ever made. We sent the pilot around to a few production companies and had some meetings, but nothing really materialised so I moved on. When I say, 'I moved on', I don't mean I never watched or wrote sketches again, I just

didn't give them all my time in the way I was doing before. It was nevertheless really useful studying sketches for so long as I learned how to get to the point quickly and find the structure in the funny; something that I use in all of my work now.

I've never professionally trained at any of this shit, it's been totally trial and error (and man, sooooooooooooo many errors!) but I learn and don't take any of it personally. Don't get me wrong, getting rejection emails really succccccccks and I sure will be cussing them, but I don't worry too much, I try again.

My favourite word is **AUDACIOUS**, I love it. Google says audacious means 'showing a willingness to take surprisingly bold risks', but to me it just means 'FUCKING GO FOR IT.' I think that's why the saying 'Jack of all trades, master of none' doesn't make sense in my head – because I think the saying has a degree of playing safe to it: stick to what you know, stay in your lane. Even as I'm writing this, I am already disagreeing with myself – I suppose you can also be super risky whilst continuing to work in the same medium. Really, it's about the story that is being told as well, so... who the fuck knows?

Something I have been blessed with is the chance to work with incredible people and companies that have taught me and allowed me to make mistakes whilst I'm experimenting with different mediums. These people and companies have never told me to 'stay in my lane'; to a lot of them, the form is the least important thing, it is the passion for the story and the world you are inviting the audience into that counts. Whilst saying that, I do also think some people in our industry can be quite snobbish towards us multi-hyphen creatives, dancing between genres and between forms. The industry wants you to say you are an incredible playwright who lives and

dies by that medium. I totally understand the romanticism of it, and to be honest, I'm slyly jealous of creatives who dedicate their lives to a particular form in order to MASTER it. I wish I had the love for one form that badly, but I don't. I consume stories in literally every form possible, and don't really have a favourite. Why do people always want you to have a favourite? And is it the point of life to master anything? Shouldn't we be trying different things forever?

Another problem I have with the saying 'Jack of all trades, master of none' is that I don't think it's practical. At least as a younger writer, I found when someone offered you paid work you said yes, because you were skint and wanted drinking money. You don't just respond, 'sorry, no, I am just a playwright', or 'no, I just write 30-minute sitcoms', or 'no, I just write feature films'. Boyyyy, when I started writing I would have taken money to write a take-away menu. Was I qualified to write take-away menus? Nope! I would have just made up some shit and blagged it. I think all of us freelancers have to try and keep that inner hustler alive inside. I know it's definitely easier said than done, and at times we want to make sure we can do it before we throw ourselves in. However, I really would have taken any job just so I could tell someone I got paid to write, and then if it didn't work, give them their money back.

One of the things I find hardest about working across multiple genres and mediums is the learning. There is SO MUCH to do and learn it's really hard trying to keep up. I mean watching as many films and sitcoms as possible, going to the theatre, reading comic books, reading picture books... I am constantly taking in information and stories. I try to keep on top of who's who across all of those genres, and I'm constantly watching masterclasses on how to create better content in the new mediums in which I work.

Whilst I am saying anyone can write across different mediums, and I really do encourage that, I do totally understand and appreciate there is a different process for each medium. For example, when I was writing my picture book, I had to learn really quickly that I didn't need to describe in the text what the illustrator was going to draw. A difference between writing a theatre scene and a TV scene is that a theatre scene can be a good 10 pages long and a TV scene is generally a page or two, maybe less. When I was younger, I wandered blindly into each medium and just tried my luck, seeing if I enjoyed it in the first place. Now, however, I really want to understand every medium and make more conscious decisions regarding which stories fit which medium best.

One thing I love to do is find fellow artists who ignore the saying 'Jack of all trades, master of none'. Taika Waititi has a brilliant TED talk about creativity. When he first started being creative, he tried everything – drawing and painting, music and poems. Some things he enjoyed, some just helped him get out of a creative stink and now all those art forms play heavily in his films. The same can be said of people like David Walliams, Donald Glover, Tyler Perry and Jada Pinkett Smith, to name only a few.

One thing to remember about all the various ways of storytelling I have attempted is this: even after you stop doing them for a bit, you don't forget them. They are skills that you keep and when the right time comes you know how to use them, so no time is ever wasted learning about stand-up comedy, poetry, drama or sketch comedy. Whilst Googling, I discovered the following explanation of the original phrase, which made me really happy:

'A jack of all trades is a master of none, but oftentimes better than a master of one.' Formerly intended as a compliment, the phrase

means that a person is a generalist rather than a specialist, versatile and adept at many things.

After reading this I was like, 'what is a generalist?', so Google being my friend, I went to find out. According to Google, a generalist is 'a person with a wide array of knowledge on a variety of subjects, useful or not'.

So writing this piece I discovered I'm a generalist, and maybe I'm really happy with that. My speciality is telling stories in any way I generally want. I also think that if we are using the saying 'Jack of all trades, master of none', we should try and use the full saying, to not put people off trying new things.

Nathan Bryon

Nathan Bryon is a BAFTA-nominated writer and a *Sunday Times* best-selling author and actor, who grew up eating as much Uxbridge Road Caribbean food as his bank balance would allow. He is best known to viewers for his role as regular character Jamie in *Some Girls* and Benidorm's sunniest holiday maker, Joey Ellis. Nathan has written for critically acclaimed CBeebies' animation *Rastamouse*, BAFTA award-winning *Swashbuckle* and on all three series of BAFTA-nominated *Apple Tree House* CBeebies alongside BAFTA-winning *Gigglebiz*.

Nathan's first book *Look Up!* (June 2019) was the number 1 picture book from a debut author and illustrator in 2019, on the Sunday Times Bestseller list, and won the overall Waterstones Children's book prize in 2020. *Clean UP!*, the follow up, was published in July 2020.

Nathan co-created BAFTA-nominated comedy series *Bloods*, a series about a group of south London-based paramedics. Nathan's debut feature film, co-written with Tom Melia, *Rye Lane* will be out in cinemas in 2023.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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