

Land Skeins

young artists' resource pack

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Introduction

Who is this resource pack for?

Hi and welcome to this resource pack exploring how to make immersive audio drama. This pack is for young artists aged 14 and up - you might already be making audio dramas and want to gain a few more tips, or this might be all new for you. Maybe you're already telling stories in other forms, like theatre or film, or maybe you're not, that's ok too! All that matters is that you have an excitement for telling stories to an audience, and something you'd like to say :)

Our names are Fay and Tash and we primarily work as theatre directors. During the Covid-19 pandemic when all theatres closed, we wanted to try our hand at making stories in other forms. We weren't aware of any schemes for emerging theatre artists to move into audio drama, so we asked the Arts Council for some money and we made it happen ourselves.

We talked to lots of people making audio drama - writers, directors, actors, producers and sound designers and we paired them up with actors, writers, directors and producers who had never made audio drama before. We created a programme of mentoring workshops, and meetings between writers, directors and producers to create four new immersive audio dramas. These dramas were all based on a magical realist relationship between humans and nature. (Magical realism is a genre where the lines are blurred between fantasy and reality.) Each drama is named after a season, and together they make up 'Land Skeins'. You can listen to all the dramas via our website www.nomoresuperheroes.com/land-skeins, or on all good streaming platforms.

As part of this project we also created a series of workshops with [The National Youth Theatre of Great Britain](#) and [The Rose Theatre Kingston's Young Theatre](#). In these workshops we shared some of the knowledge we'd gained through leading this project, advice from our mentors, and exercises that we've picked up along the way. We invited the workshop attendees to listen to the dramas we made in advance, not because they're perfect examples but because one of the best ways to understand how to make something is to encounter it as an audience member. We really encourage you to go and listen to some great audio dramas, and we've provided some suggestions of where to find them later in this pack.

If you enjoy this pack and you have questions, or you want to share your work with us, then please get in touch! We are nomoresuperheroes.team@gmail.com or @nomoresuperheroes on Twitter and Instagram.

We would like to thank the four writers: Tife Kusoro, Natasha Kaeda, Eoin McAndrew and Sid Sagar and the two sound designers Alice Boyd and Lex Kosanke. Our mentors Emma Harding, Chris Haydon, Arthur Hughes, Danielle Vitalis, Janina Matthewson, Avin Shah and Catherine Robinson. The actors Jilly Bond, Jamie Foulkes, Julia Kass, Tiwa Lade, Sonny Poon Tip, Jadie Rose Hobson, Ivo Stimpson and Alice Vilanculo. The sound panel Gareth Fry, Axel Kacoutié, Ben and Max Ringham and Ella Wahlstrom. Our partners National Youth Theatre of Great Britain and The Rose Kingston, Paines Plough and The Bush Theatre. And of course, Freida.



Freida at The Bush Theatre

What is audio drama?

Before starting to think about making an audio drama, let's consider what makes this art form unique. We've come to audio from live performance, so we're going to take a moment to compare it with theatre.

Exercise

- Here's a short scenario:

A woman comes back home after a run, she comes in the door and pours herself a glass of water.

- Now, imagine that you're writing this scene for an actor on the stage - what are all of the stage directions you would need to give them in order to share this story with an audience? Write all the steps down.
- Once you've taken a couple of minutes to do that, repeat the exercise, but this time - the actor is performing for audio drama. What are the details you would need to give an audience to make sure they understand the story?
- Great. Now compare your two versions of the scene. What do you need to write into a scene for audio that you don't need to write in for the stage? And what kinds of actions work on stage that don't work in audio?

Conclusion

In audio drama we need to be taken through the steps of a story, otherwise we get lost. If we skip from the sound of the door closing to the sound of running water - we'll lose our spatial awareness. We've got to have the sound of the cupboard door opening and the glasses clinking together as she takes one out, so that we understand what the action of the scene is. We might even need a line to help tell us what's happening. Is there someone else in the room that she talks to, who asks her how her run was? Or someone to whom she tells that she's thirsty? Is there something about her breath that tells us she's just been on a run? Think about how you can root us in the scene with sound.

What is sound design?

Making audio drama is all about sound design. In our process we worked closely with sound designers Alice Boyd and Lex Kosanke. You might be working with a sound designer, or you might be designing the sound yourself. Either way, it's a good idea to have an understanding of how sound design works.

Let's start with a simple exercise.

Exercise

Close your eyes.

Count how many sounds you can hear inside the room you're currently in.

Now count the number of sounds you can hear outside the room. What's the furthest away sound you can hear?

Open your eyes.

How many of those sounds had you noticed before doing this exercise?

Our brain filters out sounds, because if we were registering all of the sounds around us we wouldn't be able to function.

What things actually sound like and what we think they sound like are also different. For example, if you went into a supermarket and recorded the sounds, when you played it back later, it wouldn't tell you clearly that you're in a supermarket. We need to be selective about the sounds we are using to tell the audience where we are.

Sound is subjective and emotional. It can take your listeners on a huge journey. For example, two people sitting next to each other on a sofa might have different sonic perspectives on the same space. One might hear the ticking of a clock really loudly, if they're feeling a bit anxious. The other person might be hearing the TV more loudly, because they're relaxed and immersed in a show. When telling a story from someone's perspective, sound can tell us about a character's emotional state.

What is binaural sound design?

Binaural sound design is, according to our sound panellist Gareth Fry:

'A way of recording or presenting sound mirroring the way we as human beings hear the world around us. A way of recording binaural sound is using a binaural head. This microphone is shaped like a human head, with a similar weight and mass, has two ears, with a microphone in each ear.'

If you scroll back up to the introduction, you can see the binaural head that we used to record the sound for *Land Skeins*.

To understand the effect, why don't you have a listen to the use of binaural sound design in [Autumn](#) written by Natasha Kaeda. *Listen* up until 1.15 mins in. While you're listening, think about how the use of binaural is making you feel.

What does binaural do?

- It replicates how we hear in everyday life - in 3D
- It triggers empathy
- Places the audience in a spatial position
- Makes sound more accessible for hard of hearing
- It can feel like the walls are being knocked down

How can you use it?

- Avoid gimmicks
- Come in and out of it to re-introduce the trick of it
- Close to head sounds are really effective, think ASMR
- Wide soundscapes can be really effective

Breath

One of the great things about audio is the level of detail you can achieve. This is particularly true with breath.

If you were in a theatre, you probably wouldn't be able to hear how an actor was breathing unless it was a tiny theatre or you were sat in row A!

But in audio, you have this brilliantly close connection to the listener, and you have access to an incredibly subtle and specific way of communicating thoughts and emotions.

Something else to think about is the way in which our brains process things – in audio, a character is only really present if we can hear them. It's very easy to forget they're there, if we can't hear them speaking or breathing. But if we can hear them, then we can picture them! So breathing is a really brilliant way to keep characters present for listeners.

Activity

Get out your phone and use the recording function. Explore how many different ways you can find of breathing. You might want to work from different emotions states and explore how that might affect your breathing – or you might want to just play with your breath and listen back at the end and think about what emotions that might communicate. Aim for 15 different breaths!

Example

In the audio dramas we created, there's a moment in Spring, written by Tife Kusoro where breath becomes particular important. Listen between 1.52–2.30. Listen especially for the breath. What do you notice about it? What story does it tell? How does it make you feel to listen to it?

Voice

In audio, you don't have to project – you're not trying to reach anyone in the back row of a big auditorium! So you can work with the tiniest details on lines. If you want to whisper, you can really whisper! The subtlest things will 'read' (i.e. be clear and make sense to an audience).

And another great thing about audio is that you can try out lots of different options. The final edit is created from different takes, so you don't need to settle for one version. You might want to try different takes of a scene to give yourself (writer, director or sound designer) different options in the edit stage. Sometimes you don't know what will work until it's all put together, so it's good to experiment with different possibilities.

Exercise

Get your phone recorder back out and try saying simply the word 'hello' in as many different ways as possible. Play it back and listen. How many did you get?

Now imagine that you suddenly see someone that you weren't expecting to be able to see again. How many different ways can you find to say hello in this context? I bet even with this specific situation in mind, you can still find lots of different options. Play back and listen again.

'Getting' a character's voice

If you're performing on stage, you might spend some time on 'getting' a character's physicality as a way into the role. In audio, you might want to think about 'getting' a character's voice (of course, this is very important on stage too, but in audio it's all you have to tell the story about that character, so it takes on an additional importance).

Exercise

Pick a character. It might be someone from a play or a novel you've read - or someone that you've imagined from scratch. Pin down a few facts about them. Ask yourself some questions about them: What's their age? What do they do for a living? Where do they live? Who are they closest to? What are three adjectives you might use to describe them?

How do they sound? Jot down some ideas. Do they talk quickly, or slowly? Do they drive through a sentence, or do they meander through at a leisurely pace? What pitch do they talk at - high or low or in between? Is their voice nasal? Or chesty? Do they have any vocal tics (e.g. clicking their tongue, exhaling between thoughts, sucking their teeth, saying um?).

What's their 'vocal quality'? Do they sound warm? Friendly? Approachable? Harsh? Cold? Bright? Gruff?

Imagine them introducing themselves to someone at a party - they say their name, their job or occupation, and what they consider to be an interesting fact about themselves. Have a go at saying just these few words of introduction.

Get your phone back out and record a couple of takes of this, until you feel that you've found their voice.

Foley

If you're acting in film, and your character is going for a run – then you will also be going for a run! But in audio, you'd be running on the spot, in front of a microphone (and making sure you're wearing hard-soled shoes so that your footsteps are audible...!)

If you're working on an audio production for a big production company, like the BBC, you might find that there is someone with you, making the sounds of whatever props you're using whilst you're acting.

Let's imagine your character is making a cup of tea while talking to someone. If this were being recorded in a studio, you would be doing the speaking the dialogue whilst someone else would stand, most likely behind you (so the sound of the tea making isn't too close to the microphone), and go through the process of making the cup of tea, so that all the sounds are captured realistically.

If you're making audio on a smaller scale, you might find yourself doing this yourself.

We call this creation of sound effects **foley**.

Often, you will want to record a take where you are creating the sound at the same time as speaking, and also another version where you record the two separately. When the two are separate, you have far more options in the edit – for instance if you want to adjust the volumes of each as an individual track, rather than have them mixed together where you have fewer options to change things.

Exercise

Imagine that you've come across a litter tip and you are lifting this litter up from the ground and putting it in a bin.

Can you collect together some items of rubbish that make different kinds of sounds? E.g. crisp packets, shopping bags, tins, cardboard boxes, etc. Explore different physical relationships to the objects – stamping on it, twisting it in your hands etc.

Play with the different sounds you're making with the rubbish. What makes a really satisfying noise? How could you create a range of sounds? Have a go at recording different options and listen back.

Now ask yourself, what level of physical effort does the sound require for you to do the action? How heavy is this rubbish sounding? How much are you picking up at a time?

Have a go at saying the following line whilst imagining you're picking up rubbish:

Why do people only have the capacity to care about what they live through? Can't people find a drop of empathy?

Once you feel you've found a good balance between different sound effects, physical effort and voice, record this on your phone.

Now try to create the same effect by recording it on two separate tracks: one for the sound effects, and one for the voice?

How was that?

You can listen to the real thing in one of the dramas, *Spring* by Tife Kusoro. 10.57-11.50

Blocking

Exercise

By 'blocking' we're referring to the positioning of the actors in the space. As audio isn't a visual medium, we're using blocking to create a sense of the spatial dynamics in the mind's eye of the listener.

We're going to ask you to listen to an extract below from one of the audio dramas, Summer, by Eoin McAndrew from 4.50 mins to 6.10 mins. As you're listening, have a think about how this extract was blocked.

To provide a bit of context - The play is about two teenagers, Yasmin and Aidan, who are working in a cafe. It's been raining constantly for 45 days at this point. The actor playing Yasmin is wearing a portable microphone that is clipped onto her on a mic belt - so it moves when she does. This microphone is doing all the recording.

Some questions to think about:

What props did we need to make this work?

What physical actions can you hear the actors doing?

Think about where we might have 'edit points' (moments where we stopped recording because we needed to sort something practically, e.g. bring in a prop)

What might be the practical difficulties of staging this section for audio?

Now, write down where you think each piece of blocking happens with a time code e.g. 5:51 meaning 5 minutes 51 seconds.

- Aidan (played by Jamie Foulkes) is standing in a wide container of water. In front of him is another bowl of water.
- Yas (played by Tiwa Lade) starts in a separate room, standing outside a partially ajar door (so we get the effect of Aidan sounding like he's in another room).

- When he calls to her, she opens the door and walks towards him.
- Edit point for actor playing Yas (Tiwa) to take off her shoes so she can step into the water (and so that her shoes don't actually get wet!)
- Yas and Aidan wade around in the water in their individual containers.
- Yas steps out of the water.
- Edit point for her to put back on her shoes (and to make the soles of them wet so they sound squelchy!)
- Yas walks for 10 steps or so
- (sound effect of door is added in the edit)
- Yas picks up a couple of buckets, knocking them together to create a sound effect
- Yas walks back towards the containers of water holding the buckets.
- (sound effect of door is added in the edit)
- Edit point for Yas to take her shoes off again
- Yas steps back into water
- Aidan puts his shirt over his face to talk through it
- Both actors mime physical action of bailing whilst talking
- Separately, we record the sound of pouring water between different buckets to create the sound of 'bailing' and add it in during the edit.

Found audio

Something that can be fun to play with is 'found audio'. This is where the audio is in that form because in the story, it has genuinely been recorded – e.g. it's a radio news item, or a field recording or a voice note.

We're going to do a final exercise that brings all these elements together and that plays with the idea of 'found audio'.

Firstly, let's listen to one more extract, in which a character leaves a voice note on Whatsapp to a friend. This is from *Winter* by Sid Sagar, performed by Tiwa Lade. Listen from 4.00 to 6.00.

Exercise

Using the character you created previously (or someone entirely new if you'd prefer), you're going to write a monologue in their voice. Next, think of a person that's important to them – someone with whom they might have something that's unresolved, or a secret that they want to tell them.

Write – or improvise – between 5 to 10 lines of a voicenote, where they tell or confess something to another character, and where they're not sure how the other person will react.

Try to think about putting everything into play:

Think about breath. Think about the character's voice. Where are they? Are they doing any physical actions or activities whilst speaking? Do you need to do any sound effects whilst you're recording?

Try doing several different takes to give yourself different options. Which take do you prefer?

Post it online using a hosting site, and tag #LandSkeins

Top Tips and conclusion

Finally, we want to leave you with a few top tips collected from our artists, mentors and our own experiences

- Purely visual storytelling doesn't read in audio drama (the clue's in the name!)
- Break down the individual 'story-beats' to really make sure that the audience is with you every step of the journey
- Characters can 'disappear' if we can't hear them - find ways of keeping them present through breath, for example
- Think about breath - and all the many ways you can use it to tell the story!
- Remember that the smallest, subtlest things 'read'!
- How can you bring your characters to life vocally? Think of all the quirks that make them, them!
- What sound effects might you need to record to make the story come to life? Try recording takes both with the sound effects and dialogue and separately
- How many different ways can you find to play a scene? Try doing several takes to give yourself options!
- And remember... with audio - you can go anywhere and do anything so be as big and imaginative as you want! But just remember to make sure you're bringing your audience with you.

Thank you so much for reading our resources pack. We hope it was useful and has inspired you to make your own work. You can listen to the full series of all four dramas together [here](#) and make sure to follow and tweet us @nmsuperheroes on twitter/IG

