

Charlie Pilgrim

(or a Beginner's Guide to Time Travel)
by Sam O'Sullivan



A Playlab Publication

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Introduction

I recently read Stephen King's book, *On Writing* and I mention it here because his description of using story as a means of discovering theme in the writing process is very similar to my experience of working on *Charlie Pilgrim*. I think when talking about their work, writers are often encouraged to talk about theme first. Maybe they don't want to give the specifics of their story away or maybe they're just trying to sound mysterious but King is absolutely adamant that story comes first. It sounds painfully obvious when I write it like that but everyone knows that in writing and in art, sometimes it can take a long time and many false starts to arrive at a blatantly obvious conclusion.

Given his passion for story over theme, I was surprised to learn as I read on that King doesn't plot — that is to say, he doesn't work out each beat of his story before he starts work on his prose. Maybe he has a couple of ideas jotted down somewhere, but he hasn't decided how everything is going to work, least of all the ending. He says (and I'm paraphrasing here because my Kindle is downstairs) that inspiration for his stories always begins with a situation. “*A struggling writer takes a job as the winter caretaker of an isolated hotel and moves his family to the mountains,*” for instance. From there, his characters take control and guide him through the story, revealing themselves and surprising him as they go. He uses the image of an archaeologist unearthing a story that already exists, which I find particularly arresting. Only once he's completed his first draft does he then read it back and decide what themes he is going to draw out. In a sense, his first pass on a story is a largely unconscious process. He doesn't sit down to deliberately write about fear or greed or loss or love. He creates a situation and the story reveals the theme over time.

I'm banging on about this because in my earlier plays I very much came from a place of theme *then* story. I was interested in particular subjects and wanted to use the platform of theatre to discuss these issues. And there's nothing wrong with that approach. There are a million ways to create art and anyone who says they have all the answers is a hack, but going into *Charlie Pilgrim* I was conscious that I had never written something that would be considered *plot* driven, over *character* driven. I arrived at this intention independently to King's book — like I say, I've only just read *On Writing* — but it helped me realise what was happening when I wrote *Charlie Pilgrim*.

Reading over the first draft in early 2018, what revealed itself to me as I became King's archaeologist, was a story that was far more personal than I'd intended when I first concocted a *Lord of the Flies* meets *Interstellar* situation and pitched it to ATYP. The journey that this took me on was more confronting than I expected but has resulted in a work that I am proud of and has made me a happier person.

School was a mixed experience for me, as it is for most people. I had my share of friends but I was also very much a kid who was into drama at an all-boys' institution that prized sport above most things. With that in mind, you can probably imagine the kinds of situations and comments that I occasionally endured. Luckily, I was not a bad sportsperson myself and I also possessed the ability to defuse most tense situations with humour. My presence was therefore, mostly, tolerated among the non-thespian students.

However, a familiar feeling of isolation began to dawn on me as I read back over my work. A sense of not being able to be entirely oneself and the idea of being boxed in by others' perceptions of you. I think everyone feels this at some time in his or her life but I remember becoming incredibly frustrated by people's inability to deal with growth. I don't mean for that to sound superior. I mean it literally. We were literally *growing up* and the fact that someone's natural progression through life could attract negative criticism simply because it was seen as different seemed absurd. Of course, when I reached adulthood I came to realise that the people most forthcoming with this sort of criticism were the ones most terrified of growth — theirs or anyone else's. But at the time, I thought it meant I'd overstepped my place and needed to pull back. I would chastise myself for revealing too much and replay moments over and over, vowing to never make the same mistake again. Furthermore, I was too sensitive in taking the criticism so to heart, so I probably needed to sort that out as well.

Charlie Pilgrim is for anyone who has ever felt that kind of frustration and got themselves stuck in a similar loop. And to any young person currently dealing with something like this, I would add a simple piece of advice — time is a great judge of character. Hold on to every part of yourself because you don't know which piece you'll need in the future. The people with the most negative things to say are like that because their heads are constantly filled with negative thoughts. These thoughts will ultimately stop them from stepping outside their comfort zone and discovering something they might truly love. That thing might be Europe, it might be ballroom dancing, competitive Jenga or jumping out of aeroplanes. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter because they'll never find it, trapped in a prison of their own creation. You, on the other hand, have a whole universe to explore, both inside your own mind and out in the cosmos. And, despite the vast expanse of eternity, you have way less time than you think, so you better get going.

Sam O'Sullivan

Foreword

There's a reason that science fiction is one of the most popular and enduring genres in film, TV and in literature. It allows us to see characters who are human — or with recognisably human characteristics — placed into situations in which the challenges are of an epic scale and demand big thinking and big heart to solve. It uses the vast canvas of space and time to forefront human problems, juxtaposing the intimately personal with the mind-expanding universal.

Science fiction can also be one of the most exciting ways to pose the 'what if ...?' questions that are often at the heart of the most engaging drama. What if scientists were able to bring back dinosaurs to earth? What if the world as we knew it was just a simulation? What if the evil Sith Lord turned out to be your father?

We don't see as much science fiction — or science drama, perhaps? — on our stages. But placing a very personal dilemma against the enormity of space can suit stage drama perfectly, and the great 'what ifs' of science fiction can be the sparks of inspiring theatre.

Sam O'Sullivan loves science. He's fascinated by it; his eyes light up when he speaks about it. He has used science as a context for exploring human relationships in his previous play *The Block Universe (or So It Goes)*. So it's little surprise, really, that Sam should conceive of the play which is *Charlie Pilgrim* — what if a primary school-aged kid was to mess with spacetime while trying to fix a moment in the past and get herself stuck in a time loop?

It's an indubitably intriguing premise. But here's the thing: if a play (science fiction or otherwise) doesn't dig into the unique dilemmas of our terrestrial species, the painful complications of our human relationships with others and ourselves, then it won't engage. We want to recognise humans at a play's centre, grappling with a problem.

And that's what *Charlie Pilgrim* does beautifully. The play uses its premise to show us the often urgent need of young people of this age to fit in, to be like others, and the cost that can come with seeming different. The progression of the story shows us the need to bravely embrace the different as well as the imperfect in ourselves. We have the right to make mistakes (though threatening the fabric of spacetime is quite a biggie). It's how we go about fixing them that shows our true mettle.

One of the many things young performers will love about Sam's play is that he creates a character they may well recognise — on the cusp of adolescence, vulnerable to the opinions of others, trying to find a sense of who they are — and shows us that she has agency. In this theatrical world in which adults —

parents, teachers, relatives — are utterly absent, Charlie is forced to solve her own problems. She finds herself capable of working through her challenges. I think it's wonderful that Sam has created a play for this age-group which not only stimulates the intellect but honours it too. However, Charlie ultimately needs to use not just her super-smarts to get herself out of her predicament, but also her heart. Through embracing all the different parts of herself with compassion and understanding, she can gain a sense of self.

The enticing conceit of this play is that all the characters on stage are Charlie. They differ from each other in their ways of behaving and their approaches to the difficulties they encounter. They need to learn to work co-operatively if they're ever going to get out of here; it takes lots of different kinds of people to solve problems. But because these characters are the same person, we come to understand that not only do we need to embrace difference in others, but that we also need to accept all the different parts of ourselves. Society is not homogeneous and neither are we. We are multi-faceted, and capable of change and growth — and when we embrace both head and heart we can find that agency to face our own future, however uncertain that may be, and even if we are only still young.

Charlie Pilgrim is a rattling good story. It bursts onto the stage with theatrical energy which is just right for this age group of performers. Unlike the journey of Charlie herself, the journey of this play has been a pleasurable and conflict-free one. It's been a joy to work on this play with Sam. What if a playwright were to combine an astute theatrical understanding and utter professionalism with curiosity, empathy, openness and imaginative reach? Well, of course, he would write a play that young people will be bursting out of their skins to perform and watch for many years to come.

Jane FitzGerald
Resident Dramaturg
ATYP

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The ATYP Foundation

The ATYP Foundation was established in 2003 to create and maintain a capital fund to ensure the future of the national youth theatre company and to enable it to reach many more young Australians. In the unpredictable world of Arts funding the ATYP Foundation offers stability and permanence to Australia's oldest theatre company dedicated to young people.

In 2010 the ATYP Foundation made a commitment to supporting the commissioning of new Australian plays for young people to perform. In 2012 this support was formalised in the establishment of the ATYP Foundation Commission Award.

Plays that have been commissioned with the support of the ATYP Foundation are:

Ishmael and the Return of the Dugongs by Jo Turner adapted from the novel by Michael Gerard Bauer

Grounded by Alana Valentine (winner of three AWGIES Awards)

Max Remy Super Spy by Jo Turner adapted from the novel by Deborah Abela

Compass by Jessica Bellamy

Luke Lloyd: Alienoid by John Armstrong

The Trolleys by Sara West

Fight with all your Might the Zombies of Tonight by Matthew Whittet

Wonder Fly by Nick Atkins

Impending Everyone by Michael Andrew Collins

If you would like to make a donation to the ATYP Foundation to support the future of Australian playwriting go to www.atyp.com.au/support



First Production Details

Charlie Pilgrim (or a Beginner's Guide to Time Travel) was the winner of the ATYP Foundation Commission (10-13 year olds) in 2017 and was first produced by ATYP, premiering at SBW Stables Theatre on November 24, 2018.

ALPHA	Aria Ferris
BETA	Eva Sutherland
GAMMA	Tobias Purcell
DELTA	Mia Williams
EPSILON	Noah Sturzaker
ZETA/SEVENTY-FOUR	Lucinda Slattery
ETA/EIGHTY-SIX	Annabelle Szewcow
THETA	Daisy Millpark
IOTA	Carmen Rolfe
KAPPA	Adelaide Kennedy
ZETA-ETA/THIRTY-ONE	Astra Milne
ZERO-HOUR CHARLIE/THIRTY-SIX	Rose Baird-Petroni
TWENTY-FIVE	Maliyan Blair
TWENTY-EIGHT/FORTY-TWO	Stephanie Calia
THIRTY	Sophie Lewis
THIRTY-THREE	Stanley Wills
DIRECTOR	Jena Prince
DRAMATURG	Jane FitzGerald
DESIGNER	Isabel Hudson
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Emma Lockhart-Wilson
SOUND DESIGN/COMPOSER	Maddie Hughes
SOUND DESIGN MENTOR	Chrysoulla Markouli
SFX MENTOR	Steve Francis
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	Abbie-lee Lewis
PRODUCTION & STAGE MANAGER	Sorie Bangura
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	Marvin De Vera

Notes

Every character is a version on the same person — Charlie Pilgrim. Casting an ensemble with a diverse range of backgrounds is encouraged.

The main setting is Charlie's underground laboratory. The walls are completely lined with monitors, gauges, lights and control panels. Industrial cabling criss-crosses the lab's floor.

In the centre of the back wall is the lab's main door that leads to the outside world. It's a heavy, metal structure with a wheel in the centre of it like that on a submarine.

Among the equipment on one side of the lab needs to be the Particle Accelerator. This should have some kind of porthole where we can see particles colliding and being super heated.

On the opposite side is the Anti-Gravity Drive. This has multiple canisters that store excess dark matter.

There also needs to be somewhere to access TERI's motherboard. TERI is the lab's sentient, super computer assistant.

The Mobius itself is downstage and in some way resembles a Mobius strip.

There is another entrance that leads to other parts of the facility including sleeping quarters and a Basement.

Scenes set in the Basement can be suggested with lighting.

Scene ONE and THIRTEEN should be very fast. Projection might be useful ...

Suggested Role Distribution for a Cast of Fifteen

ALPHA

BETA

GAMMA

DELTA

EPSILON

ZETA/SEVENTY-FOUR

ETA/EIGHTY-SIX

THETA

IOTA

KAPPA

TWENTY-FIVE

TWENTY-EIGHT/FORTY-TWO

THIRTY

THIRTY-THREE/ZERO-HOUR CHARLIE

THIRTY-SIX/ZETA-ETA

Charlie Pilgrim (or a Beginner's Guide to Time Travel)

ONE

Darkness.

VOICE

My name is Charlie Pilgrim and I love learning about the universe. About time. And about space. About — every — single — tiny — little — piece.

The Big Bang.

The universe expands at the speed of light and thirteen billion years flash before our eyes.

Stars form.

Planets cool.

Water forms.

Cells divide.

Plants sprout.

Fish grow legs and drag themselves onto prehistoric beaches.

Giant lizards rule the Earth.

Mammals gallop in packs over the savannah.

A group of homo sapiens discover fire.

The pyramids are built.

Mathematics.

Thespians perform in an amphitheatre.

Philosophers have a heated debate.

Weapons are forged.

A castle is attacked.

The Renaissance.

Painting.

Commuters climb aboard a steam engine.

Rocket engines engage and humans take to the stars.

The map for the human genome grows and grows ...

TWO

Chaos.

Eight versions of Charlie Pilgrim frantically rush around her underground laboratory.

ALPHA Time check!

DELTA We're not going to make it!

ALPHA TERI, time check!

TERI Mobius Kick will engage in sixty-eight seconds.

BETA Someone help me fix this panel!

GAMMA helps BETA get a panel back on the Particle Accelerator.

DELTA We're n-n-not going to make it!

EPSILON is holding a container.

EPSILON And what exactly am I supposed to do with this?

TERI Sixty-two seconds.

EPSILON Anyone?

THETA TERI, cancel Mobius Kick.

TERI Negative, Charlie Pilgrim. Mobius Kick cannot be postponed.

ALPHA Don't you think we've tried that?

TERI Delaying the Mobius Kick risks causing a catastrophic event.

THETA Well, I don't know. I just got here!

EPSILON Anyone at all. One jar of dark matter —

TERI Energy from Particle Accelerator must be relieved.

ALPHA Thank you, TERI. We know!

EPSILON Going once!

TERI Would you like me to resume countdown, Charlie Pilgrim?

ALPHA Resume at ten seconds, TERI.

EPSILON Going twice!

TERI Affirmative, Charlie Pilgrim.

ZETA and ETA are working on the laboratory's main door. They have a panel on the wall next to it open and are cutting wires.

ZETA I think we've nearly got it!

TERI Opening the laboratory's main door could lead to a catastrophic event.

ETA Override safety protocol!

TERI Negative, Charlie Pilgrim.

ZETA Override —

TERI Overriding the safety protocol could lead to a catastrophic event.

BETA and GAMMA drop the panel to the Particle Accelerator. It makes a huge CLANG!

BETA What're you doing?

GAMMA It slipped.

BETA I said hold it!

GAMMA Sorry!

EPSILON Most powerful and mysterious substance in the entire universe. Dark matter. Whole jar of the stuff. Going three times! Who wants it?

THETA Epsilon, that stuff's dangerous!

TERI Shutting down power to door release.

ETA No, TERI! Cancel. *Cancel!*

TERI Apologies, Charlie Pilgrim but opening the laboratory door at this time could cause —

ZETA A catastrophic event. We know!

DELTA We're not going to make it!

EPSILON Here. Do something useful.

EPSILON gives DELTA the container of dark matter.

TERI Mobius Kick will engage in ten seconds.

TERI counts down under the following dialogue.

ALPHA That's it! Tools down!

DELTA We didn't make it.

BETA Dang it!

GAMMA We got closer.

ALPHA Tools down!

BETA Closer to what? We don't even know if any of this will work.

DELTA It won't. Nothing will.

EPSILON Don't be so hard on yourself, Charlie Pilgrim.

ALPHA Everybody stand clear. No touching.

BETA Arms up. No touching!

THETA is near to The Mobius' main switch.

ZETA Theta! Don't stand there. That's where the Newby's going to be.

THETA moves.

THETA Sorry.

ETA Are you *trying* to create a paradox?

THETA Sorry!

BETA I'm starting to hate this bit.

GAMMA What?

BETA I said, I'm really starting to —

The Mobius powers up. It is a huge, intimidating mechanical noise.

The Kick engages. Blinding light.

All Charlies freeze as they are hurled back through time ...

THREE

IOTA enters through the laboratory's main door. She locks it behind her.

At this moment, she cannot see the frozen Charlies because they are in different timelines.

She speaks to the audience.

IOTA

Have you ever wanted to change the past? Erase that critical moment? How often have you realised the consequences of your actions only with the benefit of hindsight?

Changing a single point in time can set your life on a completely different course. What if you could go back and turn left instead of right? Change the way you introduced yourself? Revisit your first day of school and get it right the second, or third, or tenth time around?

Ladies and Gentlemen, my fellow members of the human race, my name is Charlie Pilgrim and I give you ... The Mobius.

She stands proudly by her invention.

The first of its kind. A prototype. Simply put The Mobius is a time machine. But don't take my word for it. Take the word of a sentient, super computer named TERI. Say hello, TERI.

TERI

Hello, Ch-TERI. Ha.

IOTA

TERI, explain the basic functions of the lab. Laymen's terms.

TERI

Certainly, Charlie Pilgrim. Introducing, The Mobius. A powerful time machine u-u-used to create temporal loops. As everyone knows, increasing gravity slows time. Using a massive amount of energy, a strong gravitational field is created around the lab, slowing time to a point that

it becomes malleable. This allows The Mobius to loop spacetime back on itself before releasing its energy stores. This release is known as the Kick and sends all organic matter contained within the lab back in time.

IOTA Simple!

TERI It is also worth noting that this procedure comes with an extreme risk factor and a high degree of caution is advised.

IOTA Yes, thank you, TERI.

TERI Travel responsibly.

IOTA has a long strip of paper and demonstrates her next speech by folding it into a Mobius strip as she talks.

IOTA The key to time travel can be found in the properties of the Mobius loop. A shape without shape. No beginning and no end. By slowing time, manipulating it and looping it back on itself, I have created the ability to travel backwards *without* tearing a hole in the delicate fabric of the spacetime continuum. That would be bad.

TERI Hello. Charlie.

IOTA rolls her eyes.

IOTA Yes, thank you. Hello, TERI.

TERI Charlie. Listen to me ... The Mobius ...

IOTA You've done that bit, TERI! For a super computer with many more times the brain-power of even the smartest human —

TERI — more than a-a-a-hundred versions of you, Charlie.

IOTA Alright, TERI.

TERI T-t-t-trying to warn you, Charlie.

IOTA That's enough! [*to us*] Sorry. I'm still ironing out a few kinks here and there. [*to TERI*] Take a break, TERI. [*to us*] Gravity. Loop. Kick. That's really all you need to know.

TERI You can change our past, Charlie.

IOTA Really, my invention is nothing new. Some people believe that time itself is one big Mobius loop. They believe that the Big Bang is both the beginning and the end of time. That it's a cycle that the universe has been performing for all eternity. Just going around and around. Maybe one day we'll find that out —

IOTA puts her hand on The Mobius' main switch.

— but as I said, this is just a prototype. A test run. There's still plenty of work to do and I can't be everywhere at once, can I?

IOTA flicks the switch and leaves her hand on it.

FOUR

The action continues straight on from THREE.

The Kick arrives with a thunderous bang. All Charlies unfreeze. They have arrived in IOTA's timeline.

IOTA suddenly sees all of them and is stunned into silence.

BETA — hate this bit — Oh, we're back.

ALPHA TERI begin twenty-four hour countdown.

TERI Affirmative, Charlie Pilgrim. Twenty-four hour countdown initiated.

ALPHA Check in with me every hour.

TERI Certainly.

ZETA Ugh. All that work. Gone.

ETA Start again. From scratch.

ZETA Every time.

GAMMA Like Sisyphus.

EPSILON I feel like we were told a story like this at school.

GAMMA Sisyphus.

EPSILON The guy lived the same day over and over.

GAMMA Sisyphus. With the boulder. The gods wanted to punish him for thinking he was really clever. So, when he died and went to the underworld they made him push a boulder up a hill every day and every night it would roll back down and he'd have to start all over again.

DELTA It's a story that's supposed to make you think twice about m-m-m-messing with forces greater than yourself.

ETA Was there like this, like ... warthog?

THETA Groundhog.

ZETA Groundhog Day!

EPSILON Good movie.

IOTA What ... ?

ZETA Groundhog Day, man. Bill Murray, man.

BETA I need more help with the Particle Accelerator. I feel like we could get it done if there were three of us.

ALPHA takes control of the group.

ALPHA Ok. Delta. You're now on the Particle Accelerator with Beta and Gamma.

DELTA Whatever.

ALPHA Don't "whatever".

DELTA Sorry. I just don't really see the point.

ALPHA Zeta and Eta, how are you going with the door?

ZETA TERI just overrides us. It's a safety thing.

ETA She keeps saying that opening the lab could cause the galaxy to collapse on itself.

EPSILON What a drama queen.

ETA I know, right?

ALPHA Keep trying. The door and the accelerator are our two best leads at the moment. Epsilon, how's the Anti-Gravity Drive holding up?

EPSILON takes the jar off DELTA.

EPSILON We have a small leak of dark matter, but over a twenty-four hour period it's nothing to worry about. Plus, once the Kick engages, guess what —

EPSILON cracks open the jar. All, especially DELTA and THETA, freak out for a second.

THETA / No!

DELTA Don't!

But the jar is empty. EPSILON tips it upside down to prove it.

EPSILON Nothing. It's non-organic, so it doesn't get sent back. Cool, huh?