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Episode 98: Theatre-making in West Yorkshire – (01/05/2017)

Transcript edited by David Turner – (30/04/2017)

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Introduction:

DT: Hello, this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts, my name is David Turner. How are you lot doing today? I've got some good news to share, we've been awarded bronze in the recent British Podcast Awards' Represent category. The Represent category was set-up to recognise podcast producers that have gone out of their way to reach audiences often ignored by established media outlets so a huge honour.

I'll be honest with you, I still haven't stopped smiling since finding out that we were shortlisted so a big thank you goes out to all of the guest-hosts that have helped make the series what it is.

Hopefully, I'll be bringing you more awards-based good news in the next few weeks. To keep up to date with all our news and latest episodes follow us @Silent_Tongue on Twitter, Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and Instagram or subscribe to us where ever you download your podcasts.

Today's episode is in two parts, with the aid of our Arts Council funding I travelled up to Leeds to speak with two poets and theatre-makers. Coming up are two really interesting conversations about the relationship between poetry and writing for the stage. Before I introduce the first guest I'd just like to thank the man behind Nymphs & Thugs and native of Wakefield, Matt Abbott who was a huge help with the planning behind my trip to West Yorkshire.

First up is Zodwa Nyoni, we talk about the role that poetry plays in her own practice, the links between spoken word shows and musicals and the differences between casting poets and actors in her plays. Zodwa's next play, Ode To Leeds opens soon at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. If you like what we do then do me a favour and tell your friends about us in person and via social media. You can also find a full transcript of this episode via the link in the episode description. Here's Zodwa.

Part 1 (1:54):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Zodwa Nyoni – **ZN**

ZN: Hi, I'm Zodwa Nyoni. I'm a playwright and poet. The first poem I'm going to do for you is called, At uGogo House, uGogo is the word for grandmother in Ndebele.

At uGogo House

At our uGogo house
in the township of Nkulumane we ate with our hands.

We watched her cook mealie meal over an electric
two plate stove.

Slowly she would sprinkle vuvuzela,
Letting the pounded corn meal fall between her
fingers into the pot, thickening the mixture.

When ready, she'd dish the meal, into communal bowls.

Together we'd pick sticky segments and roll them with our fingers…

To dip in plates of fried spring greens and stewed beef.

Supper at grandmother's house was eaten whilst sat
on woven straw mats laid on concrete kitchen floors.

As we pulled our fingers back from our lips.

uGogo would smile and say,
abantwana babantwana bami, children of my children.

This is how I raised your mother.
Eat plenty and be well.

DT: Thank you very much Zodwa. Since this particular episode is, sort of, a mini showcase on West Yorkshire [**ZN:** Yes] it might be nice to talk about the poetry scene [here]. Well, we'll talk about Leeds as we're in Leeds today. What are the opportunities like to read work in public and what's the scene [like]? I don't like using that word scene but I don't know what else to use.

ZN: I think it has its moments. I think at the minute we seem to be in a very good moment where there are platforms and events. We are trying to build up to... The city's applying for the Capital of Culture for 2023 so I think there's a big push to try and support artists. For example, I primarily work in theatre, so you look at places like you know the West Yorkshire Playhouse which is kind of going through redevelopment and looking at putting in a studio space which they don't have and if you have a studio space you're then able to make more new work.

There are, kind of, spoken word events, some are monthly. There's like the Sunday Practice which is monthly and that's for, you know, poets and singers and rappers and there's a live band and that's at a bar called, Cellar Bar. There's another one called, Fictions of Every Kind which, I think, is bi-monthly and that's by Sarah-Jane Bradley. So, there are different things and it depends on what you're interested in.

So, for example, if you're into performance art there's the Live Art Bistro and we've just had the Transform Festival of new work. So, there's quite a few things, I think, that's happening. I think what we're getting better at [is] consistency because I think what we used to have was events that, kind of, pop-up and die out quite quickly. I think what we still need to do is look at having areas around the city and organisations, kind of, communicating a lot more with each other because you'll find that if you're in the north you'll know what's on in the north and not [necessarily] in the south. I think we need more, I guess, expansive networks but for the most part it's a very supportive scene.

DT: Do you feel like it's more, perhaps, a lack of venues or permanent venues to put work?

ZN: I think so, I think the artists are definitely there. I think you will always find artists. I think it is about platforms and consistent platforms existing, it's not just about let's say X organisation having its own agenda then they get what they want for that period of time and go, "Okay, thank you. Bye" then onto the next scheme. You don't get stuck in that, kind of, rotation of schemes as an artist. You want to see how you can grow because if you've invested time into this... It's not a joke, this is my job, I want it to succeed. As much as you would support any other occupation, this needs to be supported as much.

DT: The impression I've got since I've been here, which has not been very long at all, there seems to be quite a more open crossover. Whereas it seems to be in London particularly where I spend most of my time and where I live, people are predominantly... They'll say, "I'm a spoken word artist", but it seems to be up here [that] people are a bit more open about working in theatre and incorporating spoken word and doing other things. Is that a true impression or is it just what I've come across?

ZN: I'd say so. I guess from my experiences and looking at the artists that I know you are finding, for example, if you look at an artist like Testament who is a rapper and a beatboxer and a poet and his show had all of that in it. That was at the West Yorkshire Playhouse but then he also taught and did a festival. I was quite interested in seeing what other work people are making and I think you have to have an appreciation of that broad spectrum of work.

I think if you look at Transform Festival there was quite a mix of audiences and I think that's what you get here. We're making work, there's a respect of the work that people are making. I think, for me, I genuinely go, "I'm curious about you as an artist. I'm interested in how you grow as an artist and what you go into". I'm interested in collaborating and seeing how I can push my traditional background as a writer. How does that mix with the beatboxing or how does that mix with a performance artist or how does that mix with a dancer? I think that makes for better work, I guess.

DT: Could it also feed into the point you made at the start there, about there being perhaps a lack of dedicated venues. Whilst it's nice to have dedicated venues and support, one thing that does come out of not having that is that you mix audiences much more, don't you?

ZN: Yeah, I think you have to band together and I think when you do band together... It's hard because you're all, kind of, competing for space and time and funding. You want say, "Oh, let's all band together and support each other", but even within that you go, "Ah, there are limited resources. How do we all support each other and get our five minutes at the same time?" But what there is here and what I've seen and what I appreciate about being in Leeds is that I will go see a performance artist and tomorrow they'll say, "Maybe what you make is not my type of work but I'm here for you, to come and see your work".

DT: When you approach a new project is it predominantly from a theatre background? At what point does spoken word or poetry enter into your practice?

ZN: It's sort of weird because I started doing poetry first and I did that for about five years or so. Then there was like a clear break when I went into theatre, I specifically went in as an actor and then learned about technical theatre, then I realised I also wanted to explore writing for theatre. I did my undergraduate then went on to do my MA in writing and realised I love theatre, I wanted to make theatre. At that point I was really interested in, kind of, character development and dialogue and I think poetry then took a back burner for a while but it would kind of creep its way in.

DT: It always creeps its way back in. [LAUGHTER]

ZN: It always comes back in! I think it was a needing to learn how to let the two things coexist next to each other. I think because I'd studied poetry and I'd performed poetry for so long, I had that and I knew how that functioned. Then I went to learn [about] theatre and I learned it's conventions it was like, "Okay, how do I put these two things together?" So, when I look at, for example, my first full-length play, Boi Boi Is Dead... And that was about a jazz singer... So, when I look at all the music I wrote for that show, it was actually poems [INAUDIBLE].

The play following that, which was Nine Lives, was a series of monologues and they were all connected via a poem that ran through it. When I look at Ode To Leeds, specifically, there's a quality in the dialogue and character and poetry within that piece and I think I was slowly working my way toward this piece. It feels like with this one I have cracked it because they are both forms that you have to play with and discover. So, there was a time when I was trying to force the poetry to fit into a three-act structure for theatre and that just wasn't working, the play just wasn't working either.

The characters were suffering or the poetry was suffering and then I just had to abandon it all and try and employ... Essentially what I did was a sequence of sixteen poems and in between that I then created drama. I guess it's a poetic structure with theatre aesthetics within it.

DT: It's interesting to hear you say that because I suppose a lot of people listening at the moment will be, perhaps, considering going to Edinburgh [Festival] in the summer or, I suppose, the applications would be in already. Maybe they're desperately trying to write the show now. [LAUGHTER] I think it's an important part of the discussion about how poetry can feed in to theatre work. Quite often shows seem like, either the poetry is being forced into it or a narrative is being forced to encapsulate the poetry, doesn't it?

ZN: Yes. I think that was one thing I was really conscious about was, how do I make the two things coexist because I didn't want to feel like, "And let's have a poetry break!", and it not be really cheesy. I think the turning point came when the Literary Associate, Jacqui [Honess-Martin], at the Playhouse said to me, "You have to think about it as you would do a musical and you have to allow the poetry to be telling a story within it so that we are ready

to go into the next scene with characters". Once she said that, I realised, of course that makes sense.

I started listening to Hamilton [The Musical] a lot, there was a lot of Hamilton listening. Trying to figure out how can I allow the poetry to always push us forward? The same way that I do when I look at a scene and two characters in conversation, they have to push the narrative forward. They're not two separate things, they're both telling the same story or they're both trying to tell the same story, support the same story. You can't look at them as two separate things, you have to consider what is the content of your poetry and what is the content of your scenes between your characters.

DT: I definitely want to keep talking about this subject but I think or I believe you're going to do a reading from Ode To Leeds, which is the work you're talking about now. I think it might be a nice segue into continuing that conversation.

ZN: Yeah. So, just to give you a bit more context, the piece opens with five poets on the stage. The first poem is called, I'm Going To Start The Poem. You'll hear it with just my voice but in the performance, it's going to be five poets, kind of, reading the piece together. The poets are varied in ages, so you have Queenie who is 18, Devika who is 16, Mack who was 14, Theo who is 17 and Darcy who is 15.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be used in the transcript.]

[15:05]

DT: Thank you very much. I've got two points and I better make them now because I haven't written them down properly. Just so there out there on record. Going back to how you structure this kind of work and the difference between, I suppose, writing poetry specifically for a play. Rather than trying to take a collection or a body of work you may have worked on as the spoken word artist and trying to form that into show [**ZN:** Yeah.] and what the differences are there.

I also really want to talk more about this idea of poems as lyrics that replace music from musicals because I think that's a really nice idea. I hadn't really... I suppose I'd noticed it before in shows but hadn't thought of it quite like that. How the poem can then move the narrative on and set up scenes in a way that songs would in a musical.

ZN: I think it has to be. It has to be purposeful otherwise you're having a separate moment. You're saying this poem stands alone from the drama but it shouldn't because the two things need to speak together. When I look at, I guess, the creation of the poetry in the play I was very conscious that even though they are a group of young people who want to compete at a poetry slam I didn't want to create a play of sixteen slam poems because that's a lot to take in.

It's a piece of theatre as well, it's not a poetry slam that has moments of theatre in it, you know, it's a hybrid of the two things. So, within it there's moments where you have to build up an earn your slam poem, you have to earn that energy. You have to earn that challenge

[toward] an audience, you know, that provocation of an audience. Up until that point which is our, kind of, midway point you're getting to know the characters and getting to know them through their poetry.

So, some of the pieces are internalised, some of them are shared between two characters. Some of them are, kind of, like asides, we treat them in like a Shakespearean way where you have your aside. You have, kind of, theatre conventions and see how you can utilise them to support the poetry that you're trying to use or create, it has to feel in-sync it has to feel like one complete piece.

I think if you, kind of, take a pre-existing collection and you try and force it to fit something or you try to force something around it and you're too afraid to edit... Like, I edited a lot and I cut out a lot and I think when go through that process of editing and not being afraid of that process and not being afraid of losing things that you feel are your darlings you can come up with magic. You just have to be brave enough to, kind of, see where it goes and I say this after like ten drafts. [LAUGHTER]

This is now, like, my third full-length play and then I've, kind of, done four or five short plays but each time I had to learn that it's okay for me to not answer every question. It's okay for me to not have all the answers, so edit that piece and cut that bit out and see what that combination of text and actor and movement is like.

DT: That's interesting, is there a temptation to give all the answers? Is that what you're saying?

ZN: I think so. I think as a writer you feel like there's that burden. That's one of the things that I love about theatre is that it's collaborative and as a poet it was all down to me, I had to write and perform everything and sometimes I just didn't want to. Or some days I would see a piece of theatre and go, "Oh, that's brilliant acting. It would be great if I could fuse these two things together". That's what I love about theatre is that I can bring the text but then also appreciate the artistry of an actor or a sound designer or lighting designer and a director and seeing how we make this thing called theatre.

I'm becoming more aware of that now, I will work my hardest, don't get me wrong, to refine that text. But when an actor gets a hold of it and then they add their speciality on top of it and then a director comes on board, we're making something together. So, I don't feel that pressure that I have to answer everything because sometimes it isn't in how I've written it, it's how it's said. It's how it's directed or it's how it's lit.

DT: Yeah, it's a really interesting perspective. I suppose maybe it's hard for poets to ask those questions of themselves because quite often your work goes out and you don't see the work in action, do you? In the act of writing and publishing you don't actually see your work as art because there's a point to it where it only becomes art when it's experienced and you're not there, are you?

ZN: No.

DT: You know, that's quite nice about spoken word because quite often you're performing it and you're seeing it happen but there's another element to it in which you allow other people to interpret actions and the parts of the work and it becomes a new thing.

ZN: Yeah. Specifically, when looking at Ode To Leeds, I had to realise that... Even when you look at the casting. Because we did both where we looked for actors and asked if we were looking for actors that we can teach poetry to or are we looking for poets that we can teach how to act? When you look at the timescale that's given for a rehearsal period, which is about three to four weeks, actually.

Ultimately, we're making a piece of theatre and an audience has that expectation in their minds that if they come to a theatre, they're going to see a piece of theatre and they have a convention for that drama. So, we go, "Let's get actors that we can teach because they have to believably be poets on stage", and it's not to take away from the craft of performing your own poetry. I think it's trying to figure out the best possible way that we can allow the two things to exist.

Because I think in writing this show I realised that it's incredibly technical and I don't think I got that before. I think when you work off of writing and performing your own work I don't know if you have that perspective of what you are doing and how extraordinary that thing that you're doing is, until you have to ask somebody else to do it. I think, for me, that's also part of the brilliance of going through this experience is that you then say to actors that, "I know you look at performance poetry as something that doesn't seem very technical". Particularly if you do free verse, you go, "Ah, anybody could do that", but it's actually really technical.

So, now when you start teaching actors about it and you go, "Well I need you to be an actor, get into your character. Then allow that character to become a poet and then get a flow for your poetry"... "Oh, and by the way also there's music and there's movement and there's beatboxing". Then you realise, yeah, it is quite a feat. I think that is what I'm hoping to do with the show is that we show that it's not this art form that you can just brush aside. It is complex and it is complicated and it is beneficial to these young people. It's more than what you get at face value.

DT: Niall O'Sullivan who runs Poetry Unplugged in London is writing a series of blogposts, at the moment, which are fantastic. He's talking about performance poetry, specifically, and the history of it and how to form a critical language around. Not to knock people down but to realise what's going on and the mechanisms of it because quite often a lot of people see poetry on television when it's read by actors and there's a certain way that's done.

It's a really interesting point that you're making about, let the character read the poem instead of... I think maybe where it falls down is quite often the actors fall out of character and read the poem as they assume it should be read, rather than letting the person that they're supposed to be, reading it. So, Ode To Leeds, was this a commissioned piece, how did this come about?

ZN: I was part of a group called Leeds Young Authors when I first started writing in 2005 and went through the process of being part of a slam team that went to compete in America. They've done that annually since 2003, then they had the documentary made about them called, We Are Poets. As the poets that I knew went on to continue to be part of the group and go off and do their own things... When I then went into theatre I was doing a writing course actually at the West Yorkshire Playhouse and then I got nominated for the Channel 4 Playwright Scheme.

I remember going for that interview around 2013 and sitting in front of the panel, telling them about what I had done. How I did spoken word and then I, kind of, went off and did these competitions in America, and they were like,"Oh, that would make a really good play". And I was like, "Oh, okay. I hadn't thought about that". [LAUGHTER] So, the idea was planted then and I, kind of sat, with it so when I then won the Channel 4 Playwright Scheme, which was with my first play Boi Boi Is Dead, the focus then became, "Let's do Boi Boi and start the residency at the Playhouse".

Then, kind of, underneath this thing was simmering. [I was] trying to figure out how I was going to write this play and what would this play look like. One of the early thoughts that I had was that it was going to be five poets, I was just really interested in that format, five young people telling their story. When I was doing the residency at the Playhouse we spoke about it and they said, you know, "Run with that idea and we'll see where we get to".

They already had a relationship with Khadijah Ibrahim who is the Artistic Director of Leeds Young Authors, so towards the back end of my... Actually, I'd finished my residency at the Playhouse and then Boi Boi Is Dead went on and then towards the back end of that year, which was 2015, they said, "Okay, we're going to commission you to start writing this play". Initially, I just took the time to figure out what it was and I played with some of the poems that I'd written in the past to try and figure out what the heck I was trying to do. [LAUGHTER]

The first draft is like nothing compared to the existing draft now. That's, kind of, how the play came about is that we then started bringing in Testament, the beatboxer/rapper because I knew once we got into the 'R&D' stage that I wanted to figure out if it was working. If the two conventions were working together, so we tested that out. So, in the play there's music and there's beatboxing and there's rapping and there's singing and acting. So, we did that over the course of a week, I think it was, and we just played around to try and figure it out.

Then once we knew what the key points were of the play then I, kind of, went back and did drafts over drafts over drafts, mostly last year until they said, "Okay, cool. We're going to program it".

DT: And I believe that, very soon, people are going to be able to see the production.

ZN: They are, yes. It opens on the 10th of June [2017] and it runs until the 1st of July in Leeds.

DT: Where will that be on?

ZN: The West Yorkshire Playhouse.

DT: At the West Yorkshire Playhouse. Unfortunately, we're running out of time, I think we should finish on a third reading.

ZN: I was thinking of doing a poem called, Black Bodies, which actually is another one that's like a poem/play because I did it for the Royal Exchange last year. [LAUGHTER] So, last year [2016] in January there was a story in the news about a woman called Sarah Reid who had died in police custody and I remember there was one Guardian article about her, they'd done an interview with her mother. Then there was, like, a couple of tweets and then that was it and then there was no mention of her.

I saw that and it bothered me that we had moved on and during that time there was a lot of talk around, kind of, Black Lives Matter and the Say Her Name campaign. I thought, "Okay cool. We need to do that for her, we need to put her up and say her name", so I wrote this and it was performed at the Royal Exchange last year. I just, kind of, kept it and I think there's something more to be done with it, so this is;

Black Bodies

black bodies are Sarah
Marilyn's daughter
mother
sister
Sarah
daughter
mother
sister

black bodies have names.
black bodies have mothers.
fathers.
sisters.
brothers.
grandparents.
black bodies have friends.

black bodies are women.
black bodies are men.
black bodies are children.

black bodies are black as oil
black as tar
black as night

black bodies are black listed
black birds
caged birds
black bodies are trying to escape

black bodies are prisons
burial grounds
black bodies are schools
hospitals
black bodies are sectioned

black bodies are disappearing
black bodies are wearing masks
are rocks and hard places
forgetting the sound of their own voices
forgetting they are the old bones of the city
Black bodies are creation
Black bodies are the universe
black bodies are crescent moons
black bodies are constellations
black bodies are endless
love
the rise and fall of a lover's chest.
black bodies are warm, soft kisses
thighs parting
milk and honey
black bodies are worthy of a love that doesn't hurt
worthy of life
worthy of praise

black bodies are spirits
calls to God
black bodies are prayers
black bodies are miracles
hallelujahs
spriritуals
sermons
scriptures
black bodies are anointed
boastful believers
faithful
confessions
black bodies are temples
ancient wisdoms
ruins

black bodies are collapsing walls
are taught to weather the storm
are taught to be calm
are taught to be the sun
be the beauty
be everything
be nothing.
be divided
black bodies are questions
black bodies have questions
black bodies are questioning
seeking
black bodies are the answer

black bodies are gold
black bodies are diamonds
melanin
magic
good days
black bodies are lighthouses
symphonies
home
happiness
dancing
poetry
black bodies are promises
excellence
black bodies are divine
black bodies are royalty
black bodies are empires
kings
queens
manor house
land

black bodies are not too proud
not too outspoken
not too hysterical
not too loud
not too sassy
not too angry
black bodies are not too menacing
black bodies are not too ghetto
black bodies are not too eloquent
not too complicated
black bodies are not too ungrateful
black bodies are not too immature

black bodies are not too dishonest
not too lazy
not too nostalgic

black bodies are flesh and bones
black bodies are fragile
black bodies bruise when beaten.
scar when cut
black bodies are not target practice
black bodies are holding their hands up
black bodies are last breaths
black bodies candle lit vigils
black bodies are endless elegies
black bodies are afterthoughts
black bodies are imperfect victims
black bodies are hidden
black bodies are political
statements
votes
rhetoric
legacies
activists
black bodies are movements
black bodies are riots
black bodies are revolutions
radical
protests
die-ins
clenched fists
black bodies are boycotts
black bodies are hashtags

black bodies are viral.
black bodies matter
black bodies are Sarah
Marilyn's daughter
Claire's mother
Brandon's sister
black bodies are Sarah
black bodies matter

DT: Thank you very much Zodwa.

ZN: Thank you.

DT: Thank you for joining us.

Part 2 (30:24):

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Javaad Alipoor – **JA**

DT: Next up is Javaad Alipoor and as with Zodwa we talk about poetry and theatre making. We discuss the role, if any, that artists can play in political change, his new play The Believers Are But Brothers and how the thorny issues of regeneration and aspiration inform his writing. And on that note, it was interesting to think about how the term regeneration differs in meaning in West Yorkshire and where I live in south London. This is obviously in part to some issues of privilege when it comes to living in a disproportionately funded capital city but I think also highlights how we all need to do more to stop local government and councils branding what is clearly social cleansing as regeneration. From this introduction, you might gather that this chat is a little bit politically charged. Here's Javaad.

JA: My name is Javaad Alipoor, I'm a theatre maker, a writer and director, a bit of a performer and some other stuff as well. I run a theatre company called Northern Lines of which I'm Artistic Director and I'm Associate Director at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield and Theatre In The Mill in Bradford. I've worked nationally and internationally but the north and Yorkshire is, like, a big part of my identity and what, in some ways, drives how I see the world politically and artistically. So, given that I've been spending a lot of time in Sheffield recently I'd like to start with a poem that's kind of about the history of Sheffield.

JA: A few years ago I was working on a project in the rehearsal room of the Lyceum Theatre there and you, sort of, stare out over the moors and there's a quite controversially regenerated block of flats that are run by a company called Urban Splash. One of the things that they do is they put these really bright coloured doors on their apartment blocks, so as to show you that it was them that has done it. It just struck me as, kind of, quite incongruous given that the rest of the apartment blocks still look drab and like the council flats we grew up in rather than the Yuppie flats we 'aspire to live in'. So, this poem is about seeing that.

[The author has not given their permission for this poem to be used in this transcript.]

[33:55]

DT: Thank you very much Javaad.

JA: Thank you.

DT: Thanks for joining us, how are you doing?

JA: I'm good thanks.

DT: You said that horrible word 'regeneration', they're currently destroying the part of south London I live in. Putting up fancy signs and getting us to aspire to things. How much do these ideas of regeneration and aspiration play into your work?

JA: That's a really interesting question. I mean, I think the first point I'd make is really, quite, a political one more than a, kind of, cultural or artistic one. For me, like, that notion and regeneration is like... One of the things that I think as people who are concerned with communities and people being able to have a decent life. I think, one of the things that we've, sort of, failed to do really is unpick the different contradictory ways that the notion of regeneration works.

You know, I grew up in and spent a lot of my time for in Bradford and in Bradford regeneration agendas are broadly really positive things. You know, there's a really interesting artistic and cultural scene in Bradford but one of the problems is, there isn't necessarily the infrastructure and institution to support that or to go to the next level. So, stuff kind of ebbs and falls just based on who's around, there's no centre of gravity that allows for something, kind of, progressive to be built.

So, I think what's really interesting when you gave that south London example is like... Regeneration in somewhere like Bradford means something a bit like, "Here are some breaks for cultural businesses in the city centre of tax. Here's maybe some money for an arts centre or a youth centre". Then there's the south London thing where regeneration means, "Here come the barbarous hordes of Yuppies who are going to rip everyone limb from limb". Whether you're talking about certain parts of west Leeds or parts of central Bradford, the lawyers are not about to arrive, that's not a problem we've got.

I don't know, I think that, for me, the big question that a lot of my work is looking at the minute tends to be around emergent politics and emergent political actors. I feel like we're living in a moment where the 21st century is being born, like the train is smashing into us at some quite dramatic speed. Whether that's stuff like the way that technology is changing the way people live and engage with each other and see the world and what it means to be human. Whether it's about this big question of international migration which is only going to increase when ecological collapse starts to bite in the next ten to twenty years.

Or whether that's about the big political divide starting to shape up like, the old Right and Left division a bit being replaced by a division that's about, kind of, a liberal internationalism on one side and a populist nationalism on the other. So, for me, what unites all this stuff is like... You were talking about aspiration and regeneration and stuff. I come from quite a political background, I was interested in politics before I was interested in Art.

It's interesting that all those old certainties, you know... When we talk about like these big political categories... That is tied to aspiration. It is tied to people doing things because of the life they would like to have. I come from a political tradition I think that would have perceived, for instance, the international working class as the people who were broadly going to bring us like more freedom and justice and stuff like that. And in terms of

aspiration it's interesting, just now we're really beginning to see and be able to smell quite how much the changes in the past thirty years have destroyed that language of identity.

You know, we look at the current issues within the Labour Party and how the Labour Party is struggling to galvanise its votes. You know, we see throughout the 20th century whenever the Labour Party could win an election, whenever the Left could do well in this country it was because they could unite basically three political tribes. It went, some folk in cities in Scotland, people who lived around the great industrial cities and coalfields of the north and the cosmopolitan international working class and lower middle class of London.

Now we just see how much that's fractured, how if you're someone who's from a small town in south Yorkshire... You know, we heard a lot during the Brexit campaign about the, sort of, left behind people... Whether or not that's actually what powered it is a different discussion... But that great tribe that once existed, you know... I now live in Manchester city centre, I work in the arts and a lot of my colleagues and friends are people who are... 'Touch wood' we're surviving but people aren't paid an awful lot of money to do that kind of stuff.

So, you get people with a similar standard of living and a similar economic vibe but much more likely to have friends of different ethnicities, have a very different attitude to the EU and stuff like that. Whereas, someone who voted exit and was from a smaller town, whatever... I think what I'm really interested in is the emergence of a new world and a new political consciousness and new political actors. I think that, absolutely, especially as a theatre maker you know there's the old sort of Chekhovian cliché about, if you want to know who someone is you have to know what they want.

Almost ninety percent of rehearsal rooms in Anglo and American theatre is working out what characters want and why, so yes, it's absolutely a central question.

DT: It's the 24th of April and within the last week or so we've found out there's was going to be a general election coming up and a lot of artists are questioning what their place is in this dialogue. [Maybe] trying unite people and as you're saying, everything has been fractured and what... This is going to sound like a really depressing question. Can art make any difference in this? Can it make a difference in uniting people when artists seem to be, and I might be wrong on this... But they seem to be celebrating an individualism, which isn't the same as being selfish, but we've reached a point where people want to be who they are and they don't want to be necessarily part of groups. It seems anyway, like a lot of artists are working in that way.

JA: For me, this hoary old question of what social effects art can have, there's obviously the really boring answers, that are just true. In terms of like, in general, engagement with the arts helps. For audiences or participants, in general there's a benefit to wellness and well-being and mental health and blah blah blah. In terms of the bigger, how do we effect political change? I would go, in the first instance, we don't. In and of itself there isn't necessarily a link and I don't think it is the job of artists to change the world through their work. I think it's the job of artists as citizens and as people, if they care about politics, to find a thing to do.

I was part of a group of people who put together just after the EU vote I put together an organisation called, Bradford Says Everyone Stays and we did a big demo in support of the right of EU migrants to stay in this country. If I level with you bruv, my issue with this question, especially in theatre, I very much resist my work being labelled as political theatre. Because, not to put too fine a point on it, I've seen quite a lot of that stuff and it's often not great theatre and there's no real political depth.

First and foremost I always start from the position that it doesn't, art doesn't change politics. Art is a different thing and you do it for different reasons. I suppose they're related in the sense that they're both about truth in some way or another but I think they're very different kinds of truths. Having said that, there are clearly historical moments where works of art galvanise massive moments of social change but I think there's something quite interesting to be said about that.

I think what we confuse, as artists, is... Our power as artists, socially which is very very very tiny... With the power of a handful of celebrity artists to do stuff. So, we end up with these, sort of, bizarre artist led movements to do things and what have you and actually you think well what power do we have? Art has spent the vast majority of its life in the Western tradition, basically, pimping itself to rich people to get sponsorship. Government money helped to democratise that a bit but there's still a lot of that pimping that goes on.

We come from a weak place when we think of ourselves as artists, I think. There are these moments where art really galvanises a moment but when that happens I don't think that's about artists doing things as artists. It's when there's a real social movement that artists happened to be into because they're connected as human beings struggling for those things together and then something happens and catches.

DT: I completely agree.

JA: There's a really rich and interesting discussion about what the relationship between politics and art is and I think it's a really sophisticated and profound one. As I say, like, there's these incredible historical moments... So, on my father's side I'm of Iranian origin and one of the, not very well-known, stories about the Iranian revolution of '79. That whatever happened afterwards was a huge uprising of the mass of the people against a brutal American-backed dictator, horrendous secret police and so on, overthrown by the mass of the people.

During the lead up to that the old regime, the Shah's regime they briefly liberalised, a little bit, some of the laws on cultural censorship and so on. As a result of that the Goethe Institute in Tehran... Some students, some lefty theatre-making students approached them and said, "Can we produce some plays here as a test ground to see how liberal the regime has got?" So, stuff that you weren't allowed to do because of the Shah's pro-American way of looking at the world and his supporters...

So they decided to do some Brecht in the gardens of the Goethe Institute. One of the shows was directed by a big hero of mine, an Iranian director called Soltanpour who was tragically

executed or murdered in 1983 by the new regime. He was a member of one of the urban guerrilla groups, a philosopher and a theatre director and he directed the show.

There's a brilliant story about him, that previous to this he'd gone to jail three times, the secret police had locked him up three times. It happened after each of his shows opened and famously, the third time, he'd written this absurdist comedy about life in the Shah's Iran and in his memoirs, he always joked... It's a slightly egotistical joke... He would say that the absurdist company that he wrote was that dense or whatever and he usually got arrested on press night but with the absurdist show it was up for four nights before the secret police realised what it was he was saying. [LAUGHTER]

So, they put some shows on in the Goethe Institute and it just caught fire and people were queuing around the corner for this little moment of freedom that they'd been denied for decades. The queues got bigger and bigger and bigger, the actors took the shows outside and started doing them, completely unrehearsed, in front of people instead of in the institute itself. The police came, started to smash the protesters, the protesters refused to be smashed. And that's one of the things that began the rolling chain of events that brought them to that regime.

Now is that like an artist going, "How am I going to change this world with this show?", no. That's what I mean about being part of something bigger. You're, part of a movement and you happen to be an artist.

DT: I wanted to just talk about the importance of poetry and lyricism in your day to day work in theatre and what role it plays. Whether it's a separate thing or whether they do blur at all.

JA: Absolutely. There's a whole debate in theatre about the nature of theatre-making and like there's... So, some of our big institutions still very much work on a model that's dominated for about 100 years of, kind of, commissioning work where either a director pitches a play to the artistic director or potentially a writer pitches a play. [Either way] the long and the short of it is someone writes a play or someone picks up a play that's already been written and they're a lead artist and then they spend...

If they're a writer they get six months, if they're a director they maybe get a month prepping it and then the designer's commissioned [they] get in a rehearsal room. Four weeks' rehearsal, you know, preview preview preview, press night, 'boom', done, go home. Which is cool and there is really great work that comes out of that but there's also an increasing acknowledgement that there are people who make theatre in other ways.

So, you tend to hear people describe themselves as Theatre-Makers, implying that there is a broader sense of collaboration and there isn't such a hard distinction between writer, director, designer, stuff like that. Most of my stuff I write and direct [and] it tends to be quite a collaborative process with a designer or an actor, as well. As a writer one of my best mates [and] mentor is a guy called Madani Younis who is AD of the Bush [Theatre] now. I got into all this stuff through him running the Asian Theatre School in Bradford, back in the day.

He doesn't really write anymore but when he wrote, he was one of those people who had a semi-devised process. He once said to me a wonderful thing about the sense of lyricism in a text, he said, "Bruv, if when the rehearsal is finished. If you can't go home and write a more intense version of the things that the actors were saying when they were in the space you need to fucking stop writing". [LAUGHTER] And I took that with me really.

As a maker, as an artist in theatre text is really really important to me and, kind of, often when I see a show in my head [or] when I'm putting it together I'm often looking... To be honest, some people are really design and visually [focused] but music and text gets me going. I'm always reaching out to people to help me with the movement side of things and the visual side of things. When I'm writing or if I'm directing something else that someone else has written, I'm often looking for those moments where a turn of phrase just sums up the whole thing.

I think that, both in terms of text and in terms of movement what really interests me is... One of my big aspirations as a young writer was, I wanted to be as good as Sarah Kane, I loved Sarah Kane when I first started reading her. It's the politics and art question, here is someone whose work isn't about politics, she doesn't write stories about politics. Her politics and the questions she's asking are absolutely coded in to the formal qualities of the thing.

For me, one of the really interesting things about that style of text, that style of post-absurdist, really dark substantially political work... What's interesting is when naturalism breaks down and I think that can happen in a number of different ways, obviously, it can happen in a, kind of, sense of magical realism or whatever but massively in terms of hitting elevated text. Which is all a very verbose way of saying, I like things to sound elevated, you know, where that's relevant.

It terms of my process, I suppose, my work has sometimes been described as dense or complex which some people I think mean as a good thing and I think some people mean as a bad thing but that's cool, horses for courses. I think when you're coming up with ideas... You know what it's like when you're making something, you're [perhaps] not sure what it is you're making until you've made it.

A really important part of that, for me, in terms of trying to just begin to narrow down to what is the actual thing we're doing, is writing some stuff. Often that comes out as a prose-y essay, it sometimes comes out as a poem or whatever and it sometimes comes out as a little bit of fiction or whatever and that's an initial provocation for people. It also helps out in terms of the business of running a... In terms of the work I do in, kind of, buildings is very different, it's maybe a little bit more like that other model. But in terms of running a company and getting out there and getting co-producers and stuff, you know, it's always really important to be able to have something that you can actually take to scratch anorexia nights and say this is what we're doing.

DT: Yeah, and in terms of developing and putting stuff together, we were talking briefly before microphones went on that you just had a show happen as part of a festival which is

now touring but maybe you could just tell us a bit about that and where people can check it out?

JA: Absolutely, that would be brilliant. It's called The Believers Are But Brothers and it's the first time I've done that solo performer thing, I've not done that before. I perform, I've done obviously spoken word gigs. Actually, my first love was music before theatre so I've been in bands as a kid. But in terms of that solo model of work, I hadn't done that before so it felt like something I wanted to play with. The Believers Are But Brothers is a show about...

It came out of, I was on Twitter and there was this Guardian article about so called 'Isis brides' and I saw there were some Twitter accounts that you could follow of these people. The young women that had gone off to join Isis and I thought, "Fucking hell, I'm going to follow them. I'm going to send them a DM and see if I can talk to them". Through that, I noticed this whole world of, basically, everyone in the world is on Twitter making an argument for their politics.

So, the Taliban have an official Twitter account, right, they tweet under the name of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. One of the most insane, surreal things I've seen on Twitter was the Twitter account of the Taliban getting into an argument with, I swear to God, getting into an argument with the U.S. Supreme Commander in Afghanistan's Twitter account over whether or not a helicopter that had been shot was an American one. It was absolutely insane.

I just started noticing that the way that, kind of, Isis propaganda to young Muslims in Europe works, it's got no theological depth, it's got no political depth. As I said, I'm quite a political person, most of my family are in the Global South, even though my mum is English I've got much more Iranian family than I have English family. There's a whole way of looking at the world that influences me to do and one of the interesting things about these so-called Muslim radicals quote/unquote 'radicals' is, that package of words I would use to think about politics; colonialism, post-colonial, racism and Islamophobia, these words never come out.

What you see is a, kind of, apocalyptic hatred and love and cult of violence and masculinity and a, kind of, visual language which is very much derived from Call Of Duty, Assassins Creed, Game Of Thrones, stuff like that, a computer game fantasy world. So, two things struck me about that, the first was that that's not a million miles away from some kinds of British army marketing. Another was that it's very different to, kind of, the dominant narrative we have in Europe about why someone would carry out something like the Bataclan massacre.

Especially with the rise of Donald Trump and the rise of this thing called the Alt Right and, if you like, online radicalisation that seems to be affecting white young men around groups like [INAUDIBLE] in the States. Yeah, it seemed like a vein to follow really. So, yeah, the show tells three stories, [that of a] young American guy who gets involved with the Alt Right and so on. A young British Muslim who tries to go off and join Isis and a young British Muslim who goes to Syria to Syria to carry out humanitarian work and gets caught in a whole bunch of other stuff.

So, I tell some of the stories, there's a bit of story-telling, a bit of acting and quite a lot of technology. The audience have their phones on throughout because, as I say, this is about online radicalisation in that way and about a third of the show happens on your phone whilst I'm talking and stuff. So, I'm doing stuff and the characters of WhatsApp-ing you and a whole bunch of stuff happens over a projection. Yes, so it's, kind of, about... Not to put too fine a point on it, it's about the internet, men and whatever the hell seems to be going on internationally and politically. This madness, this light cycle of extremes and violence.

DT: Where can people check out about dates and getting to see it?

JA: My [theatre] company has got a website www.northernlines.org.uk but that's likely to change in the next couple of months. We are going to be at Ovalhouse [Theatre] in London.

DT: Ah, that's my local theatre, tell me when that's happening and I'll come along.

JA: Yeah, that'd be brilliant, there are a couple of nice pubs near there we can go for a bevvy after. We'll be at the [Edinburgh] Fringe and then we'll be a festival that's at Home Theatres in Manchester later in the year.

DT: Excellent. I think that's probably a good place to stop. We'll finish with a final reading please.

JA: Thank you. This is a poem that came out of making The Believers Are But Brothers, it's not exactly about the same stuff. It's a little bit more optimistic than the show is, not all that optimistic. It's called, When The Machine Breaks Down.

[The author has not given permission for this poem to be used in the transcript.]

[58:14]

DT: Thanks very much Javaad.

JA: Thank you.

DT: Thank you very much for joining us. I will endeavour to put as many of the links that are relevant to what we've been talking about in the episode description. Thank you.

JA: Thank you, it's been a pleasure.

End of transcript.