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Episode 111: Jackie Hagan; Nuar Alsadir – 20/03/18

Transcript edited by Christabel Smith – 19/03/18

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Part one

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Jackie Hagan – **JH**

Intro:

DT: Hello, welcome to episode 111 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. I'm David Turner. I hope you're well. This episode is in two parts. Coming up at the end is a short conversation with Nuar Alsadir, recorded live at this year's Verve poetry festival. More about that later, so stick around until the end. First up is a chat with poet and playwright Jackie Hagan. Jackie is originally from Skelmersdale, just outside Liverpool, or Skem as it's known locally and throughout this conversation.

We met up in a function room in Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre to talk about Jackie's new play, 'This Is Not A Safe Space', which she's just started touring. The play, presented by Unlimited and Big Feast, is based on interviews with over 80 people and in it, Jackie examines the impact of benefit cuts on disabled people and others on the margins of society. Perhaps predictably, considering the theme of this work, we discuss class - a lot. More specifically, when the idea of class entered Jackie's consciousness and the effect it had on her gall bladder and mental health.

We also get onto what it's like to be a working-class person moving in poetry and theatre circles, though we did also attempt to imagine what it must be like when the tables are turned and middle-class people are surrounded by scallies and Herberts. Jackie and I are both bipolar, so steel yourselves for tangents aplenty. Before I forget, if you're looking to hire a function room in Manchester for an event, the folk at the Royal Exchange Theatre are very helpful and really accommodating and rent out rooms very reasonably.

I wouldn't recommend recording a podcast in the room I used though. As you'll hear, the acoustics are very sharp, but it's a great space for meetings and you'd fit a killer Iceland-based buffet in there. You can catch 'This Is Not A Safe Space' at the following venues: the 23 and 24 March 2018 at the Attenborough Centre in Leicester as part of the De-Stress Fest, 25 March 2018 the Alhambra Theatre in Morecambe, 29 March 2018 at the Creation Space in Basingstoke, 30 March 2018 at the Lawrence Batley Theatre in Huddersfield, and 17-21 April 2018 Camden People's Theatre in London. I'll list all of those dates in the episode description.

This episode was only made possible with the aid of funding from Arts Council England, specifically their south-west regional office. If you'd like to keep up-to-date with everything that's going on with this podcast and our fledgling A Poem A Week series, follow us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook and Instagram, @Silent_Tongue on Twitter or go over to lunarpoetrypodcasts.com, where you can also download a transcript of this episode.

I'll have to take a run-up to this bit. Download and subscribe to everything we've ever done over at SoundCloud, Stitcher for Android devices and iTunes for Apple users. Oh dear, that's boring. Please do us a favour and tell your friends, colleagues and loved ones about us. It's the best way to help us reach new people. If you want to make us really happy, head over to iTunes and leave us a lovely review. I feel a bit dirty now so as a palate cleanser, here's Jackie Hagan. It might just be the first time she's been introduced in that way.

Conversation:

JH: Hiya, I'm Jackie Hagan. Where many of you have got a tube of meat, I have got a steel pole. I'll let you figure that out for yourself. I'm from Skem and I'm a writer, performer, playwright. This poem is called 'I Am Not Daniel Blake' and it's about all the things that us council-estate people do that piss people off.

We do not have permission to reproduce this poem.

[0:07:58]

DT: Thank you very much, Jackie, thank you for joining me on the podcast. I really love that line and image about Schrödinger's scratchcard and buying yourself hope. It's really nice. It's quite odd to hear that poem read in this room we're sitting in. It's luxurious, oak-panelled.

JH: The plushest room in the world.

DT: I believe it's the former executive suite of the Royal Exchange, the boardroom.

JH: It's very brown, isn't it?

DT: Very brown and trying to be imposing, but it's not very imposing anymore.

JH: It feels like a headmaster's room in a boarding school or what it would look like on the telly.

DT: We will definitely have to imagine what that looks like on the telly, the pair of us. We were chatting briefly before we started recording and you mentioned you were from Skem. You mentioned it again there. It seems like a natural place to start after that poem.

JH: Totally. I love Skem. It's an overspill town from Liverpool that was built in the 60s because there wasn't enough social housing in Liverpool. They just kind of picked people up and plopped them there. It's actually in Blood Brothers, that's where they moved to in Blood Brothers and they're made up. They're like: 'Oh my God, look at all this green!'

At first, it was one of them Utopian new towns, but the people who designed it were up in the air, they weren't down on the ground, you know what I mean? They had the best intentions, but they fucked it up really. It just became people fighting, you know? You know what happens when people don't have enough money and resources and are all repressed and everything, they just kick off. So it became like that.

I didn't know that I was working class when I was a kid, because it just never came up in conversation. There's no class system really in Skem. There's just people with slightly nicer shoes. Everyone's poor. I had slightly nicer shoes, so I thought I was fine. Alan Bennett says this so I've stolen it off him: Skem's like my inheritance because, my God, a lot of what Britain

is, is flavoured with Skem. You're not going to get an actual inheritance, so you may as well get some of it, you know?

I've told you this before, but the audience don't know this, it's studied on the Geography GCSE syllabus now as a failed social experiment, which I think is amazing, but in the bigger picture, it's not. My source for that was a fella in a pub so it might not be true.

DT: Surely these fellas in pubs must always be believed.

JH: I get most of my information from there, then most of my history comes from Blackadder.

DT: So was it a shock when you discovered you were working class?

JH: Yes. I went mad. I don't mean I kicked off, I mean I went mental. I went to university and it took me two years to figure out why I wasn't fitting in. You act differently. The whole class thing, it's not just money, is it? There's loads of cultural differences I hadn't cottoned on to. You might think 'Oh, what a stupid girl,' but I do live slightly in a different dimension in my head. Just stuff like you meet someone, you've never met them before, you slag off whatever's going on around you to bond, rather than being lovely. I hadn't learnt that yet.

I mean, my dad died at the same time, so that's not handy, is it? I burnt down a kitchen and ended up in a psychiatric ward and it just went on for ages. It went on for about a decade. But it was horrible. It's awful finding out that other people have had loads more opportunity and stuff. They're like, 'Oh yeah, we're going skiing in a minute.' It's like, 'Fucking hell, I'm going to my job.' So yeah, it was awful.

DT: Having chatted briefly before, I think we're from fairly similar backgrounds. But I was born in Westminster in London. We lived in Housing Association, but we lived behind the Houses of Parliament basically, Old Pye Street off Victoria Street. You could walk to Big Ben in two minutes, you could walk to Buckingham Palace in about 10 or 15 minutes, so growing up, you couldn't escape the difference.

JH: And it was looming over you as well.

DT: I've got no concept of what it's like to suddenly find out, but it seems to be just as insidious and damaging even if it's slow-burning. I can imagine the extreme shock, or try to imagine it because I think I had a similar thing when I was first diagnosed. I knew I had mental health issues but when I was first diagnosed with being bipolar, that appeared to send me crazy, having to face up to this truth about yourself. You may have been aware of it slightly, but it hadn't been forced upon you to accept it. Suddenly it was just dropped on you.

JH: It's like the world is suddenly a different colour, isn't it? You're suddenly seeing everything anew. Like at the end of a story when you find out the twist. I've been diagnosed with a lot of things in the mental world. You get a button now that's settled on bipolar for the minute, but actually, I want to go off on one about that. So women and girls get diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Loads, it's loads higher than for lads. Lads hardly ever

get it. It's a bit of an umbrella term. It seems to be that you're put into that category when they don't know what to do with you. You're just being a pain in the arse.

One of the big traits is that you are manipulative. I think this ties in with loads of other stuff. Being manipulative, obviously doctors just say that is a bad thing, but if you're in a world where the person, or the system, has got what you need, that doesn't have to be food and shelter, it could be validation. There's loads of stuff we need. Or love. So if you can't get that, well, you'd be manipulative. It's a smart choice, isn't it, in terms of class stuff? You've got to go about things in odd ways. Your body and mind are always trying to heal themselves, but sometimes things get in the way and so whatever trauma, or your immune system is just a dickhead, like mine is, and so your mind will do something.

I have, as a common hallucination, I hear applause, which is really nice and really egocentric. That's like mental health gone right. The body goes about it in funny ways. My body produces far too much collagen. You'd think that would make me have nice lips and stuff, but it's really damaging. I just think that manipulation is an interesting thing.

DT: I definitely notice the difference between women in my family that have been diagnosed with similar conditions to mine. The term manipulative was never used for me, but I saw it used for women. I think there is a definite issue with people's motivations being questioned as to why you're asking for help.

There's a big issue, I think, with mental health services in this country with men always being able to find redemption through asking for help, in a way that isn't available to a lot of women. The motivations behind why you might be seeking medication or therapy. Validation is seen as not being completely on the level, in some ways. You must want something else, or you're doing it for the wrong reasons.

JH: It's all so old-fashioned, isn't it? I know society clings on to old stuff, but mental health services are way behind aren't they, what are they playing at? I have had good psychiatrists, I just think some of them could be a bit… It's a surprise, isn't it, that they're not better at people and interaction with people, seeing as they've chosen a job that's to do with people and psyches. I think they should do all the psychiatrist stuff you do and at the end, if they ask horrible shit, which they always do, and you become a bit monotonous and stoic and robotic about telling them horrible answers about things that have happened in your life, but I think it would be nice if they sort of looked you in the eye at the end and said, 'I'm really sorry that happened to you.'

I think that would change appointments loads. I don't know, I guess it might be about boundaries or something. I've had ones that have said that. I had a really cool one who drove an orange Beetle and had long ginger hair and a pin-striped suit, so obviously I fell massively in love with him and started giving him presents, then I wasn't allowed him anymore, which was awful.

DT: Obviously, the people of Skem played a big part in the writing of that poem you just read. How much does your work feed through those people?

JH: It feels weird saying 'those people'. Yeah, totally, but I don't want to slag off Skem and say everyone's an 'alcy'.

DT: But I found that to be quite tender. Even though you were talking about those sides of things, it wasn't exploitative.

JH: Yeah, but some people would be like, 'I haven't got a big massive telly,' and all that. You need the whole show that I do to genuinely try to change opinions. If people from Skem listened to this, they'd be like, 'what a cow.' I think I'm from a bit of working class that's different. My God, the words working class and middle class cause bloody chaos, don't they? Because obviously, there's loads and loads of different levels. I'm just opening a bracket and not going off on one, I'll close it.

My boyfriend's from Southport and he set up the free newspaper in Skem, so it was dead handy, because he knew what Skem was, because it's quite a weird, isolated place. It's not just working class. Obviously, I've never come across as middle class somehow. Just because he knew what Skem was, that helped. I think I'm from quite a poor version, we're not aspirational. In no way would my mum want to be middle class, that would be like the worst thing in the world for her.

I clung on to my working-class identity so much at university, you know with lager and lard, all that sort of stuff, that I had to have my gall bladder out. Lager, lard, Angel Delight and repressed class fury isn't good for your guts. Now I've opened too many brackets here, haven't I?

DT: I think it's completely the right thing to bring up, that in that term 'working class', that is not one group of people.

JH: I've got it, it's all right. Sorry, that was like going 'shut up', wasn't it?

DT: Tell me to shut up, that's fine. Just because I own the microphone doesn't mean I should be allowed to just carry on speaking.

JH: There's a version of working class, maybe on the level where Peter Kay was, where you don't want to be middle class at all, you're not aspirational, you're just about getting by. Also, the way they put us across on *Benefit Street*, we're not like that either. You do nice things. You've got a bloody bin with nice red fringing on it and stuff like that. Yeah, I think I'm from a version of working class that's not often seen, so I have to put all the bad things in, because that's what people are pissed off about. I'm not going to put the nice, red, fringed bin in, because that's not what needs to be explained. They don't care about that. Skem's [INAUDIBLE] everything, the end!

DT: I might put out two versions of this interview. One will be five minutes long where you just wrap everything up succinctly, then we'll put out an extended version.

JH: This is the first question, isn't it!

DT: That's alright. You mentioned this poem is part of a larger show, so it might be a natural thing to talk about that.

JH: Yeah, so the show is called 'This Is Not A Safe Space'. I'll come to the title later because it's nice to talk about that, but it's not the biggest thing in it. I did a couple of shows before that, but it took a while to build up to actually talk about this stuff. I went round and interviewed 80 people on benefits, disabled, people on the brink and just working-class people as well. And people who had interesting things to say about class, because I think being working class, then being shoved into a middle-class environment because that's your job or whatever, is a bizarre place to be in.

In the arts, you have to like drag up as middle class to get through and network and things. I'm really, I'm going to say steadfast instead of stubborn, I think that's nicer, about not doing that, but I do see how that holds you back and how people perceive you as frigging lairy and unprofessional and stuff like that, and it's just rubbish. So this show has real voices from the interviews put in so you hear them and the spotlight's on these voices. The stuff is brilliant, beautiful, heartbreaking and funny. Dead funny. Then I speak in between about various things.

At the start, I give you not a warning, but a thing I tell you, like I do know that middle-class people have problems too. I want to make people relax. Even though it is not a safe space, it's not about going, 'middle-class people, we hate you,' because that's not useful. This idea, which is constantly everywhere, that middle-class people have had everything handed to them on a plate, or there's no problems if you're middle class, that just totally invalidates someone's struggle or any sort of suffering or you know, just hard graft to get where they are. It just ruins it so we can't have a conversation about class.

I try to put that on another table - it's all funny, by the way, it's a comedy show – put that on another table so we can talk about class, but what I don't do is talk about definitions and I've realised that is just as in the way, so maybe I'll do a few poems about that in the future.

DT: In what way do you mean 'definitions'?

JH: That thing I was saying about working-class and middle-class terms. They get in the way. Imagine whatever, Facebook, or you're at a pub table on Christmas Day if you've got a family with lots of different types of people, and as soon as you start talking about class, everyone starts shouting at you what their class level is. We all have to set out where we are, and guilt is edging in, it just becomes a bit like when you ignore a homeless person because you haven't got any money or energy to do it.

I could definitely do a comedy version of that, an outline of a middle-class person, an outline of working-class people, what we all think it is and if it's light enough, we can get all that stuff on the table and go, 'look we're just people, let's try and figure this thing out. Let's try and figure out the attitude thing.' When I say the attitude thing, I mean like class isn't just about money, it's about expectations and what you could be. Are you factory fodder or are you headed for something like this room that we're in now?

And opportunities given to you and are you perceived as a human? The biggest thing, and I do address this a bit in the show, but I'd like to really unpick it more in future because I've realised how fucking big it is, is this idea that if working-class people just would work harder, then they could become middle class. It's like 'Why give them anything? They just need to work harder,' forgetting the fact someone is working as hard as they can. Or if you feel society is looking at you as not being worth much, how can you have any self-esteem yourself, how can you fight against all of that when you're knackered? Obviously, the problem is much more complex than 'just work harder'. That's just a way of not making yourself have to deal with this massive problem we've got in society.

DT: It's really poisonous, isn't it, this idea that in order to be accepted, and to improve yourself, you have to redefine yourself? You can't be accepted as being working class, you have to climb that ladder, be aspirational, seek to achieve something. It feeds into the idea, 'don't complain about your low-paid job, get another job,' as if that's an opportunity or a possibility for a lot of people.

JH: As if you've got time to do that as well, just go to 30 interviews this week.

DT: It came up on Twitter recently. Sabrina Mahfouz wrote a long Twitter post about how she's constantly asked what it's like being a woman of colour - I think I'm remembering this bit right - child of a migrant, working within theatre and working in the arts. No one ever asks her – and this was her reason for the post – no one ever asks her what it's like being working class in the arts. That's what she sees as being the real barrier. The general gist was that the class barrier she faces feeds into all of those other issues. To her, that's where it starts.

JH: Yeah, totally. I get - I'll give away the answer to the riddle, I've got one leg – I've got one leg so I get invited to loads of diversity things. The way I said loads then. I do appreciate those things, keep booking me, but yeah, loads of talking on panels and stuff like that. I get invited on the leg ticket, so I go and I do a few gags about the leg and then I start talking seriously about class because no one's ever, well they have now, because I haven't shut up about class for a year and a half, and I'm not going to shut up about it. It's like I have to say the word first because it's an elephant in the room that no one really cares about as well.

It's nice, I've got a really good gaydar for working-class people who've had to drag up as middle class to get by. I can spot you. It's great because often we smoke. You can go out and just be working class together for a minute and it's a delight.

DT: This has come up quite a lot in conversations, mainly because I'm the one leading them and it's just my experience…

JH: Yeah, and you're good.

DT: But one thing that doesn't get spoken about that often on the podcast, mainly because we're talking about people's work, but I'd like to pick your brains a bit on it. We've just discussed what it's like to be working class in a very middle-class scene, especially poetry and theatre. Out of all the arts, it's probably only then contemporary dance that could get any

worse for a working-class person. How is the other side of the coin when you then come home as an artist?

JH: I thought you were going to say what's it like for middle-class people being in a room full of working-class people? Because that's hard.

DT: That's what I'm hoping for in a future conversation because I'm very aware it can be equally as isolating and exclusionary.

JH: Part of it's not knowing the etiquette isn't it, and people being wary of you. On the question you didn't ask, when I went round in the interviews, my sound man is a fucking gorgeous human, dead lovely, he's a big fella, you can't miss him, I think he probably says he's middle class, but in Skem, he's really perceived as, 'ooh, get you,' but less camp than I just did. So in every interview I had him next to me, holding the mic, trying to disappear. He's surprisingly good at disappearing, so yes, it was like oh fuck, this is going to be interesting.

I mean, people are fine. I think it's when people are in a group situation that they have to do that bravado thing. I understand. I love bravado. I think it's heartbreaking, but I love watching it and writing about it. But on a one-to-one… I've run out of steam there. So what's it like going home? Oh my God, me going back to Skem now, so it's been quite a while, I don't mean… I go back to Skem all the time, I've been this arty-farty wanker for quite a while now, I said the word 'integral' in front of my extended family four years ago and that's been my nickname ever since. So it's a jokey, nice, constantly taking the piss.

I mean, also I've got loads of mates who are not into arty stuff, who are just normal, well to me, normal, working-class people. Very working class. I just forget and I come out with stuff, like I'll say 'aesthetic' at the Labour Club or something like that, so yeah, I've got plenty of people around me, reminding me.

DT: Do you ever catch yourself really 'estate-ing' it up?

JH: Oh yeah, Christmas Day, my accent went all over the place, then I felt like I was being too posh. But I was doing the dinner that day, so it was already stressful, you know? I still really want to impress my mum and our Mike, my brother, it's the performer's personality, isn't it? You just want to impress your family all the time, so you do it by doing gigs above pubs when they're not even there. I dunno if it's like I'm trying to fit in, I'm trying to remember me as Skem and I'm going 'all right there, lad?' I also want to impress them because I've done all this shit, so I'm like, 'oh yes, the aesthetic of my new piece…' I'm bonkers in Skem.

DT: We're now getting around to 2018's version of what is now an annual event. This happened a year ago. I'm really happy for it to have happened to the series, but we've been shortlisted for a British Podcast award which is a great thing, the only independent literature podcast to be nominated in 13 categories, I was really made up about it. I'm really close to my aunt, my mum's sister, I tell her everything. The look on her face! She knew it was really good, but she had no concept of what it was. We were talking earlier, not only is it an arts-based thing, but still in a medium that people still don't quite understand what a podcast is. They know it's sort of like the radio.

I'm hyper-aware of not questioning the reason people don't engage with the arts, they can do what they want with their life, it's not a failure on their part, but it's funny that I do what I do, it sits in two areas that people don't have any idea about. Doubly obscure. Word got around the family, because it's on social media and stuff and family members follow the podcast stuff on Instagram and Facebook, everyone was really pleased this thing had happened, but no one understood what this good thing meant and what it was about. It was really funny. I found myself going, 'it don't matter, it's just some old bollocks,' but I don't mean that, I only said 'some old bollocks' because I was down the pub.

JH: Flippancy is a very working-class thing, isn't it? You're not allowed to care or be passionate. You can be passionate about football.

DT: You're allowed to mention a thing once, it gets the reaction it gets, then you drop it. You can't keep bringing it up. But I found that one thing that sort of linked me, or tied me back in, even though my life was becoming more engrossed in poetry, this art form has taken me further from what I felt my roots were, but that isn't actually what's happening, that's just what's in my head. But I thought, as long as I go to the pub still on a Sunday and have a chat with the same people, it's still alright. But I've stopped drinking now so I can't go to the pub and I've lost that tie.

It's this idea of what have I got to continue to do to still be alright in people's eyes. I think the reason I'm thinking about it is because I've noticed a lot of people who clearly aren't working class within poetry sort of dropping their H's because the pressure's there, because that's where the funding is. The funding is there if you're from a, whatever the Arts Council think is marginalised. There's also the issue around people who are working class but don't necessarily look or sound it, that problem they have. I've spoken a lot with Josephine Corcoran who runs And Other Poems, who grew up in a low-income household, a Catholic family with loads of kids, and next to nothing growing up, but if you met her, she sounds really middle class. It's just the part of the country she grew up in, she doesn't have a particular accent. I was really surprised when she told me about her upbringing. I'd completely pre-judged.

I think it's really good to know that funding is going towards platforming whoever we consider to be marginalised, but it's sort of forcing us to wear our identity as a badge and that's not always that positive. Do you think this work around how we identify as working class has a finite period? Is the aim to continue to identify in this way or is the aim to reach a point where it doesn't have to be spoken about?

JH: Personally, I won't want to make art about the same thing all the time. Something else will piss me off. Bound to, isn't it? Do you know what, you get mascot-ised, you become like a token thing for whatever it is you're going on about. I don't mind doing that even though it's shit, but I'm happy to do that if it means I get to do whatever show I want. I was the token disabled person for ages. I'm a bit sick of that. I think you just do it until you're going to cry sick out of your eyes and hope you've done something good in that time, I think.

DT: How do you manage other people's expectations of your work? Do you physically withdraw for a while? Presumably you're not creating work that's that different, it's still your

voice, it's just about how you emphasise particular parts of the work. Do you physically have to withdraw from performing in order to come back and redefine, in order to avoid the same bookings?

JH: Do you know what, I've just gone with intuition. I've got a producer who tells me what to do. He seems to know what he's doing. I don't think this is a good thing. I don't think people should aim to do this, but I just kind of 'rrrrr' until I burst. I'm not as clever at managing it.

DT: The main reason I ask is because probably quite a few people listening will be thinking the same thing, because of the way funding works. Just because there's a pressure on all of us I think, where do you earn your money? You very rarely earn money through book sales or ticket sales. A lot of the R&D is Arts Council-funded, a lot of the tour costs are Arts Council-funded. There are other funding bodies, but it's mainly the Arts Council and the process of going through that application is just a series of ticking boxes. It's not to knock, I think there's a lot of really great work that comes out of the Arts Council, but-

JH: I think you should credit funders slightly more. I don't know how to say this without going 'I'm awesome,' so just be aware I'm trying not to say that, but they do also just choose good work, don't they?

DT: I think it's more the middle layer. I think the funding bodies do a really good job of spreading money out, but then there's the pressure on producers, I found that pressure, of then trying to direct a project to be representational rather than diverse but then hit those diversity quotas. That feeling then filters down to the participants of the project, that's a natural thing. If I take myself out of the production role and put myself in more of a writerly or artistic role, how do I avoid the pressure of being the writer with bipolar? Because I'm so clearly defined by that and I'm happy to talk about it, you drive yourself into those boxes almost, don't you?

JH: Yeah, my mate's show was sort of about this. Sophie Willan, she's dead good, she's not a poet, she's a comedian, about the way you get branded as different things. I think I've been lucky in the fact that the things I've wanted to go on about are the things the funders want me to go on about, it's just accidental. That doesn't mean it's not like sophisticated work… people just love a bit of Skem and I do as well. People love disabled people. They don't, society hates us, but funders like us.

DT: I'm really glad you brought up the false leg, because on an audio thing, I don't know how I'd visually tick that box.

JH: It's normally got little lights on and stuff like that. It's a new leg and it's shit and it's not getting decorated until it starts to behave. It's horrible, green with a big bulbous thing on it. Yeah, I've got a big false leg and I don't mind, I quite like it actually.

DT: I'm going to send that two-minute clip to the Arts Council in my evaluation. See? Since we're talking about funding, maybe we should talk about the Jerwood, is it a prize or a commission? Congratulations, by the way.

JH: It's a fellowship. Like *Lord of the Rings.* They give you loads of money. So to put cards on the table, they gave me 15 grand.

DT: Along with Jane Commane and Raymond Antrobus?

JH: Yeah and 15 grand is like, what the fuck? Someone did say to me, 'You do know that to some people, that is not a big massive lot,' and I was like, 'Fuck off!' Still, my God. For me, what that meant was, this is like that bit on The X Factor, like 'poor me' because I've got one leg because I've got systemic sclerosis which is an autoimmune disorder, which is life-limiting, so it's like you die sooner, which is like 'oooh.' I'm not blind, I'm not going to go through all the things I haven't got, but my eyes are shit, that's what I'm trying to say and my hands don't work.

I've got loads of shit wrong with me basically and chronic fatigue and that, so what the money meant was I don't have to run around the country doing workshops and panels and all that stuff. I do love doing that stuff, but I need a rest. I need to just frigging sit down for a minute. I do a lot of stuff for free, I've done over 1000 workshops for free. So that meant I could have a rest, which was just amazing. Also they give you mentors, pay for mentors, so I've got Clare Shaw, do you know her? You should interview her, she's dead good, from Burnley, she was the second biggest baby every born in Burnley. You should get her off that fact. She's amazing.

I feel embarrassed now because she's my mate as well. She's mentoring me, kicking me up the arse, so I'm writing a new poetry collection, and Henry Normal because I've got a sitcom with him as well. It's what, in the tube?

DT: Yeah, cos it's not in the can yet, is it? It's in the tube before it ends up in the can.

JH: It's sort of quavering at the start of the tube. So that's what Jerwood is. Joy Francis runs it, she's just one of them people, you talk to her for five minutes and it changes your life. We were talking about, I feel like I'm not doing as much here, because you're nice. You know on a radio thing, I had to do loads of gags, all whistles and bells and it was like a persona, a bravado, acting a bit stupider than I am and she saw that and she was like, 'all that extra, you know you don't have to do that,' but she put nice things in, like 'you're a smart cookie, I know you already know this, so you don't have to do that.' It was like, 'oh, I'm a smart cookie!'

So yes, they're just dead good and it was so much validation for me because I thought I was crap, so it sort of added to the role. I need outside sources because I haven't sorted myself out yet, to keep telling me I'm good.

DT: I follow the Jerwood Foundation quite keenly and I know quite a few poets and writers that were up for that, that reached the shortlist.

JH: I saw people coming in for the interviews and waiting and it was like, 'ooh, what am I doing here?'

DT: It's a really big thing.

JH: Some people will hate me now.

DT: Maybe at the time.

JH: Thanks!

DT: No, but it ties into that idea that for a lot of people on the shortlist, £15,000 is a huge amount of money, but I think it's important to talk about the fact that for a lot of people, it isn't much money. The first lot of Arts Council funding I got was £13,000. £3000 of that went straight on equipment, so I was left with 10 grand to pay other people, some for me, but most of it was for travel. I couldn't believe it, I'd never seen that amount of money in my bank ever, it was insane, but when you think about it, it meant I was working for about £2.20 an hour. It's not much money for the amount of work that goes into the project.

It wasn't why I wanted the funding, it wasn't to turn it into a job, it was to make it happen and give me more time to focus on it, but one issue around the funding, it's not the problem for the funder, it's the idea that more needs to be done to realise how desperate a lot of people are for this money, because it's the only thing that's going to pay your rent, allow you to remain as a full-time artist. Sometimes the attitude of some funding bodies is we've done a really good thing, we've given £3000 to this person, pat ourselves on the back, and you think it's still not really going to do much.

JH: Artists On The Brink. That should be a podcast, shouldn't it?

DT: I think that's pretty much what this is anyway. The main reason I was asking about mentoring is just yesterday, I had a meeting with a young producer in Bristol and I'm going to be using some of the Arts Council funding to start a mentoring scheme, to help someone else start their own podcast. I found someone that's, similarly to me, from a low-income background. I'm suddenly thinking I now need to pretend I know what I'm talking about, or at least look like I know what I'm doing because I haven't actually spent much time explaining to people my process around the podcast. It just sort of happens. Now that I'm in a position where I have a responsibility to sit down with someone, and…

JH: There's all the electric cable part of it to explain, and whatever that means.

DT: How not to hang yourself with your own cables whilst interviewing someone is the main thing.

JH: Yeah, but it's the talking to people. You do it differently.

DT: What role do you see yourself in as an artist? Do you see yourself as mentor?

JH: Even just on the bus, I'm being a frigging mentor because I get asked. I'm not slagging off all these people, but I'd say I get five messages a day on Facebook asking 'How can I get my work published? How can I be in the place you are overnight?' I also don't like the thing 'overnight success' because I have grafted my fucking arse off. It's been 12 years. I've hardly said no to a gig, until I got ill. That's the answer, often. If you love it, work your arse off. There

are things you can tell people about publishers, I can do that. I think that's got missing somewhere because people see Kate Tempest and stuff like that and say, 'I'm as good as them, why aren't I there?' Or, 'I'm better than them.'

It's four types of inspiration isn't it? It's like watching people who are way, way better than you and becoming really despondent, watching people better than you, like the normal type and you're like, 'whoa, I really want to do this now,' watch people who are shitter than you and being like, 'oh fuck this, this whole art form is crap,' to people who are shitter than you and going, 'yeah, I'm going to do this!'

DT: There's this other podcast called *The Comedians' Comedian*, and similarly to this, it's just chats, quite relaxed, but there's always a question about 'how did you get started in stand-up?' I would say 95% of his guests, and he's had a lot of people on, would say, 'I went to a stand-up night, and thought everyone was shit and I could do better than this.' There's a particular type of ego that leads you to want that kind of validation from the audience. That's probably a natural segway into asking you what your relationship is with the audience and what kind of validation you look for from your work.

JH: It's changed loads. I think I've become a tiny bit of a grown-up around that area. To begin with, it was totally, 'look at me, look at me, I've got something to say, I feel like no one else is saying this, look at me, I'll do a little dance for you,' which is the same as say, every time I'd get a taxi or something like that, it was just how I lived. I think it's a bit bipolar and I think it's a bit the youngest child, that seems to be a thing. Some people didn't get enough attention as a kid, but with me, I got a lot of attention as a kid, I was on stage and stuff. My mum's bipolar as well, so I had this flamboyant… I feel like the 80s were like cerise and electric blue. When I came home as a little baby in a Moses basket, because that was all the rage, they put it in the middle of the floor, they turned the telly off and they looked at me instead. That was the role.

So to begin with, it was all about that. I'd love it if people came up afterwards. And then it sort of changed. When I was doing the leg show, 'Some People Have Too Many Legs', I sort of, maybe did it too early because it was like, I was writing it when I was in hospital and didn't know if I was going to die or not. I was clinging on to it a bit, but I think it was a good show. People were coming up afterwards and they'd tell me all about stuff. My life at that time was 100s and 100s of people telling me their story and it can kill your brain a little bit. It's like empathy fatigue, especially when it's a thing you're trying to process and you're doing on stage every night.

So then I started wanting to be on my own a little bit. Then with this show and then with the play, it was weird because it's a play and you're not in that, you're not present, I wasn't there half the time. Then with this show, my mind, it's like I've finally thought about it in a considered way. People clap. Wonderful. People have to clap, that's the tradition in life and people join in, so I'm kind of like, 'OK, that's what happens at the end.' If they're like 'wooo' then OK. But also this show, the fact that it's not a safe space and I'll go there. It's not the type of show you go 'woo hoo' about, it's the type of show you go 'fucking hell' and sort of leave and ruminate over. I hope.

The other reaction is people come down crying, going - sorry, I sound like I'm saying I'm amazing - but some of the reactions are like, 'I've never felt myself represented on the stage before,' except we don't really say it that way in working-class land. It's that sort of sentiment and that is lovely. I fucking love that. It is a little bit exhausting and makes me feel like, 'shit, I'm in a position of responsibility, OK, let's fucking bring it,' but now I'm like fine.

I can't see… People laugh when they're happy and clap. There's no noise that people make when they're inspired. That's a joke. I was trying to do it deadpan. I don't mean that, I just mean it's in their own heads. It's more of a big-picture relationship with the audience. If people hate it as well. I just want to start a fucking discussion about class, so that was a very long answer.

DT: No, it was perfect. I was just going to say to the listeners, if you want to go and make a noise for being inspired and be involved with this discussion about class, you can check out 'This Is Not A Safe Space'. We're not going to mention dates, because what I will have done is mention the dates that are still available in the introduction to this episode, so you should already know the dates and venues. It sounds great. People should definitely get along to see it if they can. Follow us or follow Jackie on Twitter and the other places we exit now, in the ether.

JH: Are we still doing the thing?

DT: Yeah, it's fine, I'm really professional, I just slipped into it.

JH: I thought you were just talking. And the sitcom.

DT: And the sitcom as well. We exist online.

JH: And the kids show.

DT: We haven't got round to that. People need to check you out online.

JH: I still don't know if we're doing it.

DT: Yeah, it's still happening. Thank you, Jackie.

JH: Thank you, David.

<u>Part two [00:58:33]:</u>

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Nuar Alsadir – **NA**

Intro:

DT: You stuck around. Thank you. Next up is a short conversation with Nuar Alsadir. Late last year, I was completely made up to be invited to record some live interviews at the wonderful Verve Poetry Festival in Birmingham. I was lucky enough to go along to their first event last year and it remains one of the best literature events I've ever attended.

The organisers, Stuart Bartholomew and Cynthia Miller, asked me to come along and host four 15-minute conversations with Sandeep K. Parmar, Roy McFarlane and winner of the Verve Poetry competition 2018, C.I. Marshall. And of course, Nuar. The loose idea for the conversations was to ask each writer about the role that live literature events play in their writing, but as you'll hear, it quickly fell apart. But in a good way.

Instead of editing them together into a single episode, I've decided to put them out as sort of bonus tracks at the end of this and the next three episodes. It seems like the right thing to do, though I might regret it. Sometimes, you just have to make a decision and stick with it, right? Up now is me and Nuar talking about writing for an imagined reader and treating our notebook and pen as tools of the trade. Tell your friends about us.

Conversation:

Hello, everybody. Welcome to Lunar Poetry Podcasts at Verve Festival in the wonderful city of Birmingham. I'm joined for the first interview in a series of four this year by the fabulous Nuar Alsadir. Nuar is a poet, writer and psychoanalyst. Her collection 'Fourth Person Singular' was shortlisted for the 2017 Forward prize for Best Collection. I was going to say this interview wouldn't be as shambolic as my reading earlier. It might be. We'll start with a reading please, Nuar.

NA: Sketch 27. A man entered the subway car at Borough Hall, was about to sit, but just as his knees began to bend, the train jerked into motion. He stood up as though regaining composure after a brief humiliation, as though it were somehow shameful to be subject to gravity's impersonal force, caught in its grip, an object controlled by physics.

DT: Thank you very much, Nuar. This is the most intimate stage I've ever stood on. It's almost like being on a milk crate. I have to remember that for the majority of the audience for this, it will be in audio and descriptions of where I'm standing are of no use to anybody. The series of four talks we're doing for this weekend, I was asked by Stuart and Cynthia to provide an idea of what we'd talk about. I suggested that, because we're at a literary festival, we would talk about the importance of those festivals to the individual writer, so we'll begin with that question, Nuar. I'm excited for the answer, I sort of already know… What role do these types of festivals play in your development as a writer?

NA: This is my first festival so it's to be determined.

DT: When writers do this to me on the podcast, it's my favourite thing. Just to leave me floundering. I do have to remember there are people watching me so I can't bask in it for too long. You were saying before that you're usually more isolated, did you use that word?

NA: Reclusive.

DT: How does that inform the way you write?

NA: I think it informs it completely. I don't know how to answer that question, that's so hard. I am reclusive, so I write from the reclusive space that I occupy and the work is coming from an internal space where I'm addressing an imagined reader that understands me. What Bakhtin called the 'super addressee', someone whose complete understanding and goodwill is part of how I imagine them.

DT: Did you at any stage of your writing development design a reader in mind to write for?

NA: Yeah, I think I always have a reader in mind that I'm writing for, but it doesn't necessarily match up with a person in the world, so when the work goes into the world, whether at a festival or in publication, it's going to reach readers who are real people in the world and not just my imagined reader. And I go… because I can't control who's going to read it and how they're going to read it, but I think when I'm writing it, I have control over my addressee, who I'm imagining as I'm writing.

DT: I'm looking at this wonderful… I was going to say sea. Fishpond of faces in front of us, it's quite an intimate room, it's not that big – I just find it hard, how you would ever write without looking at these people, and how this is your first experience.

NA: This is my first time looking at the audience, actually. I was blocking them out.

DT: This actually came up in a conversation with Caroline Bird, which will become Episode 110 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. We were talking about the idea of an imagined reader that you might be writing for. How do you avoid the safety that comes with designing that reader yourself? How do you challenge yourself?

NA: Why would you want to?

DT: OK.

NA: Why would you want to imagine an unsafe reader? What would that do to your speaking, writing self?

DT: Isn't it natural for most people to eventually move towards the safe zone?

NA: I don't know if I can speak for other people, but why would you want to do that in your writing? I'm not quite sure. To imagine judgement or criticism, I don't know how that would be a goal, or helpful.

DT: I think more that I was wondering how you maintain that reader as being… pleasing that reader, how that becomes a challenge or stays a challenge if this person's imagined in your head. Because it would be easy to imagine them being really pleased with what you write as well.

NA: I think that if you're not worried about pleasing the reader, if you're worried about or concerned with being understood, pleasing isn't really part of being understood. I feel like pleasing the reader is about narcissism and wanting to be rewarded and to win, win in the eyes of others and I feel like I write out of a very different space, where I'm trying to communicate and connect. If I imagine the reader to be someone who in my mind is alive and feeling and attempting to hear me and see me and understand what I am expressing, then hopefully it'll be universal enough that it will reach the universal part in other people who weren't part of my imagined reader, but have some core of universality and humanity in them, which hopefully the work will reach.

DT: Do you have any other writers you share your work with, obviously we've established that you don't necessarily share it with live audiences, but do you have other writers you share your work with in order to maintain that sense of universality?

NA: Well, this book, 'Fourth Person Singular', when I wrote it I actually didn't show it to anyone until I was done and then I showed it to one friend, who's a writer, and my editor and that was it. Then as it went through production, there was an intern at Liverpool University Press, who was a senior there, Natalie [INAUDIBLE] and she worked on it as well. That was it.

DT: I'm finding it hard to completely process it, because most poets I talk to claim to be reclusive, but you're really seeing this one through. You live the life. Would you be able to explain a little bit more about the process behind this collection? About the form that it takes, and the structure.

NA: It's largely a book in fragmented form, so there are some fragments that make up a long poem in the beginning and then there are a few lyric essays and some what I call sketches, which are actually written in a sketch book, but they're verbal sketches as opposed to drawing sketches. Then there's an autobiography in footnotes, which is something that had come to me in a dream. I dreamt I wrote my autobiography and the pages were blank and the text was all in footnotes.

It kind of took its own form, but I also was writing it in a short period of time because I'm a massive procrastinator and I was coming up against the deadline for the book, I had a little over a month and I had to write it or miss the opportunity. I kind of went into an isolated space and I didn't do anything else while I was working on it. I think it comes out of an enclosed state of mind and time period. Sometimes I look at it now and I almost don't remember writing it. Although I recognise it as mine, it's sort of separate for me.

DT: I find it interesting when writers talk about moving into writing in sketch books, freeing themselves from lines. Is that a conscious decision or did it reflect this idea that you'd seen what the story might be?

NA: I'm actually really obsessed with drawings and notebooks. When I go to museums, I try to find the drawings of the artists I love. I feel like they're really intimate and I love when the drawings have places where something has been erased and it's smudgy and you can see the layers of the process. That's what I love to look at and to contemplate. I think in some ways this book was really my attempt to make the work I would like to read and that I enjoy. Even if it's visual art or writing.

DT: Do you sketch as well?

NA: No. I used to make pottery, that's the closest I've come.

DT: I'm a furniture maker. I carry sketch books around with me, but I hate drawing, it turns me inside out because I'm really bad at it, basically. I'm still obsessed with this idea of creating images. I think that's what first drew me to poetry. I was determined to create images with my words. I was still trying to draw it in a way.

NA: That's really interesting. Heidegger actually has this moment where he talks about a carpenter and he says that if a carpenter wants to make something with wood, the carpenter can have an idea in their head of what they want to make and then the idea goes from their head to their hands. But once their hands touch the actual wood, the wood has its own volition, the grains go in a certain direction. It can be wet, it can be dry, so in touching the wood, an idea then has to be altered, so the idea has to go from the hands back to the head and be altered.

So an idea should always move in two directions, from the head to the hands, then from the world back to the head in order to be adjusted. If you're really writing something to have it work in the world, you have to also be listening and taking in what the world is telling you.

DT: That's really fascinating. I think it sort of ties in with my obsession about the right type of paper and the right type of pen.

NA: I have that same obsession.

DT: What's your pen of choice?

NA: At the moment, I'm really into those Le Pen pens. They're really thin, fine-pointed pens.

DT: Why anyone would want anything other than a fine nib is beyond me. You can leave if you have anything above a fine or micro nib.

NA: And they have some great blues, French blue, Peacock blue. I think they call it Peacock, I call it French in my own mind. I like that colour. That's what I'm into now, but notebooks, I'm having a hard time with. I keep trying, I have to switch it up, I can't keep writing into the same notebook. I feel like I go through phases, in the same way that my process, sometimes it'll work for me to wake up at 5am every morning and write first thing. And then it's almost

like I exhaust that and it doesn't work anymore, then I have to change it up and develop a new process.

I have to do the same thing with paper and pens. I'm in between notebooks. I've been trying a few, but I've realised that what has been working is no longer working and then what I thought would work really doesn't. I think I had an idea of what I was going to write next and I felt like it should go into a certain notebook, but then it's not right.

DT: I can't believe we have to stop now. It's very frustrating. I could go on about pens and paper forever. I'm holding a small notebook in my hand now.

NA: What do you have there? Describe it for the listeners.

DT: I'm not going to because it's horrible and I'd have to mention the brand name.

NA: Moleskine.

DT: As if anyone's listening from Moleskine. We're going to finish with a reading.

NA: I'll read another sketch. Sketch 64. Pleasure and disgust, the border of desire, of aesthetics, where beauty and the uncanny meet. Is this the brink one must always live on, bear and bare? The vulnerability necessitated in feeling alive. When I've bared myself, I feel a compulsion to send out a flurry of signals to adjust the reception of others, to scramble the image that may have been momentarily revealed of me.

DT: Thank you very much, Nuar. Thank you, Verve. Give yourselves a round of applause.

End of transcript