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Episode 90: Savon Bartley; Belinda Zhawi; Travis Alabanza – (18/12/2016)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

Intro:

DT: Hello, this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts. I'm David Turner. Today's episode is in three parts. Coming up, we have Belinda Zhawi and Travis Alabanza, but before I introduce the first guest, I have a bit of news regarding the podcast.

I've just been awarded a grant by Arts Council England, with a view to providing transcripts of future episodes, as well as the bulk from our archive. From February 2017 to September

2017, I'll be working towards producing transcripts of at least 80% of our episodes. Details of where these supporting documents will be found will be announced in the New Year.

To keep up-to-date with all new announcements, follow us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Tumblr and SoundCloud and at @Silent_Tongue on Twitter or subscribe to us on iTunes or Stitcher. Tell your friends, yeah?

First up is Savon Bartley. I was lucky enough to meet up with Savon while he was over in the UK from New York on a mini tour. I won't say too much about Savon as the chat begins with an introduction. I think I might have to stop interviewing Americans as they make me sound very melancholic. Apparently, Victorians used a phrase 'the morbs' to indicate melancholia. Americans make me sound as if I've got a right case of the morbs. Here's Savon.

Part one:

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Savon Bartley – **SB**

SB: The title of this poem is One Blood.

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DT: Thank you. Hello, how are you doing?

SB: I'm all right, how are you?

DT: I'm thinking you should just introduce yourself.

SB: My name is Savon Bartley, I'm a Chicago-born poet, currently you can find me sleeping in New Jersey and you can find me doing poems anywhere, but mostly in New York City. I'm a writer, I'm a poet, I'm an educator, I'm a mentor in residence at a place called Urban Word NYC, which is a not-for-profit youth literary organisation in New York City. We offer free workshops, free open mics, free poetry slams, free anything, to the youth of 13th to 19th in the state of New York. We just want them to write poems about their feelings.

DT: How is your not-for-profit funded?

SB: Through very generous donations. Urban Word has been around since '98. They recently went through a very different venue change, but over the years, they've built some really good relationships. Urban Word is one of those things that people know about, they see it's doing a good thing and want to be part of it somehow. It's just we need those people to have money, so through the individuals who started the programmes to the people that

are with it now, these are all artists, facilitators and administrators in their own right, who've accomplished many things in their own careers and they pool it.

We lean on the relationships and we have wonderful relationships with the Knicks basketball team, with grants across New York City and universities and things like that. We just do good work and from my experience with the non-profit, you do good things and good things come back to you. And we promote a lot.

DT: Is that framework of donations a standard model in the States for arts donations?

SB: Yeah, I would say it is a standard model. The difficulty ranges depending on what you're trying to do, as the mentor in residence or the artist, I don't really get to see all the background, who's cc-ed in what email and things like that. I don't know the interworkings. I probably wouldn't want to know the interworkings actually.

DT: Having completed two Arts Council applications, I can guarantee you don't want to know. If you can just turn up and do it, it's much better.

SB: I love my position. Kids come up and say 'hey, can you read this poem?' I say 'yes, I can do this, this is my job'.

DT: Although there's a lot of difficulty raising money, it strikes me that there might be a lot more freedom in what you can do. You don't have to justify it in advance. With the funding system in this country, you have to have a very clear idea of what you want to achieve before you do it and what your audiences are. There are very few ways to be just given money.

SB: Yes, definitely. Before, you were saying that here, unfortunately, you're kind of cutting arts, which kind of happened already in the States, but you were saying it's easier for individuals to get the grants. From my perspective and experience, it's difficult both ways, but for individuals to get grants over in the States, way more difficult, just because you're not established in anything, who's to say you're actually going to do what you say you're going to do with the money? Often, you'd be denied the first time, no matter what. You can be having the cure for cancer and they're still going to be like 'no, next time, try again in two years'.

Organisations like Urban Word, who have built the relationships, it's difficult for them as well, but thank goodness, they kept going and have what they have now. It's always a difficult thing, asking for money, and it's the last thing I want to do as an artist, I want to create things, I want to create videos and poetry and shows, whatever the case might be, galleries, showcases, anything I can possibly think of. These things require money I do not have, may not have for a very long time, so I think to myself, maybe I can get a grant or scholarship, leave it at that.

With that comes a time to write the grant scholarship, the revisions of the grant scholarship to see who's going to be looking at it, doing research on that person, time, like if I submit it to you February of this year, I won't get my grant through until later in the year, which puts my project on hold, things like that. We just want to create things. We just want to be artists. It's difficult.

Even when I was at school, they cut the arts programmes in the institutions, high school, middle school, things like that, you had art, drawing, theatre, whatever the case may be, the States didn't see fit, or some areas of the States didn't see fit. It didn't think it was doing anything so it cut its funding so they could have the people that get paid more. Kids are left doing math. It's important for math, but expression is important as well. There has to be some kind of tool or outlet.

DT: You mentioned the Knicks. I saw a family of Knicks fans walk past on the river earlier, which feeds my interest. Is it common for sports to support the arts? Most football teams here are obliged to do some community work, a lot did it anyway, but it's very rare for that to involve the arts. Is it more common in the States?

SB: Most definitely. When you have particular franchises or big organisations that have all this money, you are forced to invest a portion of that, however much depends on how much, or what the clarifications are, how to invest that in charity work. So I'm going to speak directly on the Knicks.

I don't know the cc-ed emails thing, but in projects I have been involved in over some years, and they did have larger budgets. But it's this basketball team or sports team or big, main company gets a million dollars. They have to use 10%, 20% of that to invest it back into the community somehow and the best way to do that is the people that need the most, which is the arts community.

As long as it's positive, as long as it's flourishing and being effective in what it does, they will have a list, a Google Doc of charities to donate to. Right, we have £10,000 dollars, we'll got through the alphabet on the sheet, pick one and sign a cheque.

DT: So the struggle for the American arts is getting on that list.

SB: Yeah, we've got to get on the Google Sheet. What do I have to do to get on the Google Doc?

DT: I don't want to talk about money anymore. We'll break the cycle by a second reading.

SB: OK. Sounds good. This piece is a cento. A cento is a form of poetry where you take multiple lines from different texts and put it on one sheet of paper to create a brand-new text. Say, I take the last four inaugural speeches of the President and pick out one line here, one line there, put it on the same page, you have a poem. I didn't want to do the President, so I did Kanye West because he's important to the culture. This is cento or excerpts from the Kanye West discography about the city of Chicago.

I'm from North Chicago, so this means a lot to me. The name of this poem is Yeezus Part 5.

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DT: Thank you. You made him sound like a bloody genius.

SB: He is.

DT: I interviewed someone yesterday who's taken excerpts from 50 Shades of Grey and it made me want to read the book. I think ripping excerpts out of this is good.

SB: There we go.

DT: So you're living in New York but from Chicago?

SB: Yeah, I'm originally from North Chicago, which is a wonderful story. I say North Chicago, you automatically assume that's the city of Chicago. North Chicago is actually 30 minutes outside the city. People would never ask me that, so they say 'ah, Chicago'.

DT: I love Chicago.

SB: Beautiful, yes. So basically, I'm from the 'burbs, but I've been in and out of the city most of my young life. My whole family's been in the Lake County area for the last 60 years. My aunt has lived in the same house for the last 30, 40 years, with the only twins in the county. Our family has the only twins in Lake County, Chicago. We have a church. It's a smaller area, one of those smaller-town things. I moved out of Chicago when I was a kid.

DT: Chicago feels like a collection of small towns.

SB: Little boroughs. You have the West Side, you have Jew Town, you have South Side Chicago, all the Wild 100s, Chinatown. It's similar to a lot of cities I go. Even being in London, I realise each place has its own vibe, Peckham, Brixton, Finchley have their own vibe.

DT: Peckham has its own vibe if they don't stop the infiltration that's happening at the moment. Don't get me started.

SB: I hear it's getting gentrified now.

DT: It's getting beanie-fied.

SB: That's a new one, I've got to write that down.

DT: This is going to be a big tangent. I don't go to East London, they can do what they want there, but they're on our side of the river now. It's not right. They've built an overground train from East London to South East London and it's all gone wrong. As long as they stay off Walworth Road, I don't care.

I'm probably projecting, but just wondering as a poet on the Eastern side of the States, is it a matter of course you end up in the spoken word scene?

SB: Before I was doing poetry, I was into theatre a lot. I did a lot of acting. The reason I moved to the East Coast was to pursue an acting career. I got a job offer at the Viacom Centre, Nickelodeon, all those people, my agency was in New York.

DT: Viacom's my favourite ident at the end.

SB: I went to Viacom UK, we did a poetry reading for anti-bullying week. It's awesome. So yeah, I moved to New York to pursue a dream of being an actor because if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. I believed the hype. It was the writers' strike that happened the year I came over, my agency flipped over, there was a lot of mess.

Push came to shove, I stopped acting, but like many people I've come across liked poetry in high school. This girl that I liked, liked poems, so that meant I liked poems.

DT: That's how I started cooking.

SB: You like food? I guess this is going to be a lifestyle choice. Yeah, I didn't get the girl, but I realised I liked writing, which is something that had never happened before. I hated writing before.

DT: Isn't that the true love?

SB: It's the true love, it's the goal. It's all. You Tube was the thing. Then you had things like [UNCLEAR 0:20:01] and that's pretty much everyone's gateway to the poetry lifestyle. I did that. I wrote in my room. I did small events in high school.

DT: What age is that?

SB: Your 10th year, 14-15, secondary school. I wrote things, I graduated, then I started going to New York, so I'm writing in my room two years. I did an open-mic to see what it was, fast-forward some more, I found out what competitions were like, poetry slams in the city. Me and my friend would go weekends, on a Friday or Wednesday. Then I got to college and met other people that also did poems. It kind of feeds itself when you keep up with it.

The point I took poetry seriously was my freshman, sophomore year at college. There is a historic thing in New York called the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, one of the most recognisable poetry cafes in the States, actually around the world. They have a poetry slam on Wednesday nights, so me and my friends from college were like 'We're going to go to New York, we're going to slam, we're going to kill the game, no one's going to be better than us'. Talking crap, right?

DT: I can't imagine anyone doing that in this country.

SB: No, it does not happen.

DT: 'I'm going to be so polite. I'm going to love everything.'

SB: Man, we were going to change the game. We were saying all kinds of crazy things, but we go. It was a wonderful night and I remember meeting a really good friend I'm still friends with to this day, in the line. We did well. For that night, I won the slam. It was the first really big slam I did. We went the Wednesday, to go back the Friday. Friday's like the big, big night and the host for Wednesday, Jive Poetic, came up to me and said 'You're good, kid, I like your poem, can you come back Friday?'

I said 'I've got a class. I'll come back next Friday'. He happened to ask how old I was, I was 17 at the time. He was like 'You can't come Friday', I said 'why not?' He said 'you have to be 21 in order to slam for the team'. Because if you win on Wednesday, you have a chance to be in the team, representing New York City at the big slam. I said 'that sucks' but what he did say was I should go to Urban Word NYC . I said 'what's Urban Word NYC?' and that's the story of how I started doing poems.

I went to Urban Word, they had their own poetry slam, a youth one I was qualified for, and I ended up making that team to represent New York in a big national competition. Ever since that particular Wednesday night, I thought I might be doing this for a long time. Fast-forward three or four years and I'm working at a non-profit and that's a beautiful thing. I owe them a lot, more than they really know. More than they'll ever know, but I appreciate them.

DT: What's the motivation for the mentoring? Is obligation too strong a word? I can't get the wording quite right. I served a carpentry apprenticeship and I wouldn't have my job skills if the system wasn't in place that you train the next generation. I'd like to see more of it in the arts. It's surprising to me.

SB: For me, I'd never planned on being a mentor, a teacher. I hated school, couldn't stand it. I graduated and said 'that's it, I'm not going back. After four years, I got a piece of paper, it's done'. For me, it was by accident. Also, I was already doing it, but not knowing I was doing it. When you get to a particular level or do certain things, there's always somebody watching, even if you don't know it, especially coming back to places like Urban Word, places I went to earlier in my college years, after graduating, people would say 'you're the guy who did the thing' or 'I recognise you from way back when, hey, can I send you a poem? Can you look at something really quick' I'd say 'yeah, I like poems, I'll look at it.'

How I particularly got into teaching was there was a year for this competition that the usual coaches for the slam team weren't going to be around. I kind of asked, not asked at the same time, but ended up coaching a slam team. First time ever coaching. We did that and that was a cool experience, like 'crap, how do I know how to tell you how to do these things?'

What was happening was I am a product of the people that had mentored me, so it's like passing down the knowledge. I know what they taught me, so I'm going to teach you what they taught me and you're going to teach whoever. It's like a domino effect. So out of the coaching, a member of the same team was in a university team, he gave me a call and said 'hey, you're kind of the only person I trust with this team, would you be my coach?'

I said 'I don't coach, I don't do that side of things, I perform.' 'But I love you to death, man'. So I said 'OK, I'll give it a shot and it did well. It did well. In that process, I said 'I think I do OK

at this'. There was something beautiful I found in being the one pushing for art in a particular direction, not carrying it, as in I do in whatever it is I do, I'm always feeling all right, this is my art, I'm going to carry this to wherever it is I'm going. It's where they are, they have their own experiences, their own poems, their own things and work on them. We're up at 2am going through drafts, Google Docs, crossing things out, using different tools.

DT: It's freeing.

SB: It's freeing, yeah, and there's a moment when you see a lightbulb above their head go off. When that happened to me, when I really paid attention to it, when I saw one of my students have that breakthrough, that brought me more happiness than anything I did on my own, just to see that. Yes, that's it, you got it! To see that flourish and become something on a stage or in a book or in a classroom, I'm like yo, we worked on that for three weeks! Even though I didn't write it, I feel as though I was part of that experience. Fast-forward, going to places like Urban Word who say 'oh, you should come back and teach a workshop'. What do you mean? We don't teach workshops. I teach one, then they say 'you should teach another one'.

There are people that know they want to teach, people that know they want to push whatever craft they're working on, carpentry, dance, poetry, all that, but I think it's a growing thing. To grow into that place, to no longer think 'what am I doing? How am I going to change the game? How am I going to produce quality work?' When you get to that place and you're content in your creation process, content in what you do, whatever it is, you also understand you're not going to do it forever, you're going to have to give it up, give it away to someone else. I have zero problems giving that to the students I have, trusting them and saying 'when I'm done, whenever that is, it's going to be OK. The art is going to live through you.'

I also teach now knowing there are individuals in my life I look up to, everyone has their heroes, and there have been moments, very few moments, but moments that I'll always remember where I reached out to these heroes, as close as you're sitting next to me, and did not receive the knowledge I would have hoped to get. I know that if I was in that position, I would never want someone else that looked at me to feel that way.

DT: Never meet your hero.

SB: Never meet your hero!

DT: They'll only let you down, they'll only burn you. I think we should finish with a reading.

SB: Let's do it. Things I don't get to read too often, I read a short one. I never get to read my short poems. Because we did Kanye West last time, we'll do Eminem this time. It's an erasure poem, when you take a piece of existing text and cross out the lines you don't want. Whatever is left is your poem. This is an erasure of Eminem's hit song, My Name Is, from his first album. I appreciate the poetry.

Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.

DT: Thank you very much for joining us.

SB: Thank you for having me.

DT: I may already have said this in the intro, but all the links to your blogs will be in the description of the podcast.

Part two:

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Belinda Zhawi – **BZ**

DT: That was Savon Bartley, take a look at the episode description to find links to his work and online presence, as you can for our next guest, Belinda. Belinda recently began in a new role as Associate Poet at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and is also a member of the fantastic Octavia Poetry Collective, based at the South Bank Centre, also in London.

We talk about those things and other things. You know how the format works. I probably talk too much, my apologies, but I really enjoyed talking to Belinda. It's hard to shut up sometimes.

BZ: This poem is called Mother, a response to some sections in The Handmaid's Tale.

Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.

DT: Thank you very much for joining me, Belinda. A quick note, because I've chosen to record next to the children's play area in the Royal Festival Hall in the South Bank, by the Poetry Library, there may be some background noise, but joyful children's noises.

BZ: Exactly, innocence.

DT: Would you mind introducing yourself?

BZ: My name is Belinda Zhawi, I am a writer, poet and budding bookseller.

DT: We could start by talking about your first piece. Was that written for Octavia?

BZ: Yes. Octavia were approached by the South Bank Centre to respond to The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood. There was a whole festival around that time, different people doing different forms of art that responded to that work. The book itself is in sections so different people were allocated different sections to respond to, so I responded to that, going through some of the text and editing it to a different narrative.

DT: Could you explain what Octavia is?

BZ: Octavia is a workshop space for women of colour, led by poet Rachel Long and it's been going for close to a year now. It's doing really well. We're housed at the South Bank and meet up every month to do workshops on different forms of art and expression, so it's not always poetry. It's sometimes life drawing, sometimes novels.

DT: How did you get involved?

BZ: I guess Rachel had some people in mind, who she approached to be part of Octavia and if they were interested, they joined, but there is a desire to write in that sort of space, surrounded by people who are receptive about your story and your perspective.

DT: Have you been part of a collective before?

BZ: Yeah, years ago. The poetry course at the Roundhouse that they do for young people is called Roundhouse Poetry Collective, that was my first experience of being in a collective. Then we were all signing one again every year, so basically we weren't giving other people a chance to do the course.

DT: Move along.

BZ: Exactly. Their way of moving us along was to give us our own collective, which was called Rubix. Rubix was a lot of fun, Rest In Peace Rubix. I shouldn't say that, because we haven't officially disbanded. Some people might get sore about that. It was fun, we were funded by the Roundhouse, supported by them, put on a show in their studio space, went to Edinburgh in 2011, 2012, that was really fun. I was also part of another collective called [UNCLEAR] which was led by [UNCLEAR 0:37:42] alongside [UNCLEAR], that was a time when they brought a few of us guys on board. That was an interesting time as well.

DT: Obviously a big part of your practice now.

BZ: Actually, I never really enjoyed the collective experience. After Rubix stopped, I wasn't really interested in being in a collective. It's something I'm still not really interested in. I'm interested in communities, for sure, that support the work I do and allow me to be the voice of other people as well, and it doesn't have to be in a collective sense. I'm more interested in spaces where we can exchange ideas without having to feel bound to one another.

DT: Did you find the experience restrictive?

BZ: I think it works for some people, but for me personally, I find I'm not very good at committing myself in the way being in a collective requires, because you have to be giving equally and it gets to a point where some people are giving more than others. What I like about Octavia, even though it's become a collective, really just started out as a space for workshopping each other's work. Even now as a collective, it's about putting in as much as you can and getting the same out of that.

Another community I was part of was Burn After Reading, founded by Jacob Sam-La Rose. That was really interesting in the sense of almost being a collective but not, just being a space where you come to be supported and support and contribute, but however much you put in is however much you take out.

DT: It's similar to Lunar Poetry Podcasts, which started alongside Lunar Poetry magazine. There were a couple of other people involved. It faded away a little bit, like the collective you mentioned but hasn't officially disbanded. It was more about having agreed principles, rather than having to produce work together. We just agreed on what we thought wasn't there and produce what we thought was lacking.

Was the performance at the South Bank from the whole collective?

BZ: Most of the collective, pretty much everyone.

DT: How did the show come about?

BZ: As I mentioned before, it was from a commission from the South Bank Centre as part of their London Literature Festival, but if you want to know more about the process, it was just about meeting up a lot more regularly than normally. We all got our sections through email and whatnot, so everyone is obviously then working on it and meeting up while rehearsing and choreographing in a way that made it interesting, as opposed to just having one person read after the other, that would have been a bit much.

It was about mixing up things, speaking over each other, making the performance as dynamic as we can.

DT: It was one of the best spoken word shows I've seen, because of the physical aspects, video, BSL interpreter, which was a really interesting aspect in itself, because the signing seemed interpretive itself and also, the way you read it. What probably gives the best idea is you weren't all getting up and reading in turn, it was very much a dynamic and fluid performance, you were getting up and reading alongside or over each other.

BZ: Layering things. We just wanted to make it as engaging as possible. So many times, you have five women just talking about really intense stuff.

DT: The problem with going to any collective reading is you're all there because you share an identity or way of thinking, so to go to a series of readings from a collective…

BZ: Everyone's telling you the same, different voices of course, different textures but definitely similar influences in a lot of ways. This was all Rachel Long's vision, anyway. Everyone contributes what we can, but she's also got a really strong vision she's putting out there.

DT: How collaborative was the physical aspect?

BZ: It's more Rachel coming up with a framework, then us negotiating with that when we meet up. That's pretty much how it works. We were all very much in agreement that we didn't want it to be a straightforward, stand-up-and-read type of reading. We wanted to expand it a bit and give it more life.

DT: You've recently started as poet in residence at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Central London.

BZ: I'm nodding, like people can know.

DT: I always forget people don't necessarily know or care.

BZ: I got approached by someone from the ICA late summer, asking me if I wanted to take on the role as Associate Poet. I didn't read the whole email, I got very excited immediately, then I read it again and it was 'we'll be talking to a few other poets as well' and I was like 'damn. But that's cool.' I'd seen what Kayo Chingonyi had done the season before and I thought it was such a fascinating role, it came as a really pleasant surprise when they got in touch because I really admire Kayo, somebody over the years I've looked up to and been aware of.

That was really interesting to be offered to fill in her shoes. We met up a few times and they liked me, I guess, so they were like 'yeah, you've got the job'. I didn't say to anyone for a few months. I wanted it to be official on the website.

DT: Nothing worse than having to explain what went wrong.

BZ: Yeah, I got this job, 'but Belinda'… That for me was a good thing in every sense. I've started now. It's stressful at the same time, but I'm really enjoying it.

DT: I interviewed KIA when he was in the role, if people wanted to go back in the archives, they could listen to that. What's involved in the role?

BZ: It's more of a curatorial role really. It's not writing-centred. It would have been nice, there are residences that do that, give you time to write, but this is more about engaging with people on behalf of the ICA to bring more people into their space, to open up people to different forms of contemporary art, spoken word being one of those. There's going to be a series of events, which involves me putting on a talk, a discussion, a couple of workshops and anything else I want to do. It's just about running it by the content person.

DT: Any events lined up?

BZ: The first two are happening next week. It's going to be a private workshop, then the first event of the role is going to be a discussion called Language and Memory, Poetics of the Personal, in discussion with four black women poets working and living in the UK at the moment, talking about their practice, their process. It's all about how much their personal life influences their work and also, any intercession between the personal space and political ideas.

It's going to be a very relaxed, informal discussion where we're discussing things and reading in between, just flowing and talking to the audience.

DT: I'll post a link to the ICA website, also we'll retweet when the events are happening. How free are you in this role? Is it an extension of what Kayo did? Any flow?

BZ: No, there's no overlap really, unless I chose I wanted it to be that way. Again, different artists try to get as many individual perspectives as possible, so it's not pressure to live up to that legacy in any shape or form. I think it's quite a free role, in terms of judging other commissions I've got in the past. There's room to manoeuvre in ways I see fit. The only restrictions out there are quite logistical as opposed to creative.

DT: Did you have to make suggestions of what you'd do in the role before you got it?

BZ: Not really, there was no pressure, it was more when the role was offered and I accepted, it became more 'what are your plans?' Loosely and sketching out because museums and galleries have to plan way in advance for each season, so it's about fitting within that.

DT: As part of this, I'll be talking to Travis Alabanza, who's artist in residence at the Tate and we were talking about the differences in what Travis considers to be CHECK queer and political in their work practice and what a big institution accepts as queer and political, and the compromise you have to make in your own work.

BZ: Yes, I'm trying to find a way to see how far I can go. I've definitely been having thoughts around this. Obviously with this event, originally I planned it to be a women of colour but after approaching people, people are busy, so it's going to end up being four or five black women in conversation, which is also fine, because it's similar, kind of like the same thing, but I think it's about the phrasing.

There's no problem with that. People want to hear those conversations, people want to engage with those narratives, but I don't really see that as super-radical or whatever. What I see as radical is taking the conversations I have on a regular basis with other women into those spaces which are quite wide, quite patriarchal, and for other people who are not really in that world, they might be like 'this is a bit much'.

DT: Is it that your work suddenly become radical just because it's in that space?

BZ: Yes and it's not, much, it's quite basic. There are so many connotations around that, but also the point I'm trying to get to while I'm trying to find my way, is that sometimes the phrasing of the marketing material… You might say what it is in an explicit manner, like 'four black women sitting down to have a conversation about their practice and their work' and that is a bit much, it has to be toned down.

What I'm finding is quite straightforward, they're not really that out there. In those spaces, it's got to be hushed down a little bit more, to chat to everyone and bring them through the doors, buy tickets and watch the show. You've got to sell tickets. In my own space, that

language is not a problem, it's permissible. It's really just the conversations you have and I'm not being as straightforward as I'd like to be. I'm just being wary.

DT: I'm very interested in how these roles work, because if you're an artist trying to make a living out of any practice, you have to do these things and there will be compromises, especially with someone like the ICA. If you go back to Travis' experiences, the Tate is obviously a massive institution. The ICA is nowhere near the size and you're a bit freer, but the ICA is more commercial, because selling tickets keeps them alive. It doesn't have a membership system, it's a £1 or something to buy day membership.

One of the first times we met was your spoken-word night, the first night of Veranda at Libreria Bookshop.

BZ: Yes. Like I mentioned before, I'm a budding bookseller, so proud of myself. When people ask what I do for a living, I say 'I'm a bookseller'. Part of getting the job was I'd be putting on an event in the shop once a month, which will be poetry-heavy, poetry-centred, poetry, spoken word, however you want to define. The one you came to was the first-ever one and it was a Black History Month special. It was a good night.

DT: It was a very good night.

DT: We had a good bunch of poets.

DT: Three very good speakers and the open-mic was of a high standard.

BZ: I quite like those, it's nice, I really enjoyed those. It's a side-project, really down-to-earth and warm. We had our second one two weeks' ago, a week ago, and that went really well. I was worried the turnout wouldn't be the same.

DT: Lizzie and I found this, the first night was rammed, then it dropped off.

BZ: It was interesting to see the turnout on the same level, also because we didn't have Black History Month special, but a lot of the people came back, a lot of new faces. It's always nice to be doing this and see faces, sometimes faces become the same faces, it's a small scene, so it's quite nice to have this fresh thing where we're experimenting.

DT: That's one of the biggest problems, to keep new faces turning up. That's down to who you're booking. As long as you've got a fresh mind to who you're booking, that's what draws people in. One of the beauties of open-mic nights is you go to meet your friends and the big problem is, it's the same people.

So that's Veranda. You going to continue that night at the book shop?

BZ: Yes, as far as I'm concerned. We're the big money-makers. Joking, just kidding, ha ha, in case the boss hears this. I love my job, do not fire me. We're doing really well in terms of that event. I run that with another young poet called Malakai Sargeant who's actually doing

his A levels. He's forever inspiring to me, such an incredibly clever young man, never tell him this to his face.

DT: I'll cut this bit out. Or we'll send him a special episode.

BZ: Yeah, he's a brilliant young man and also Barbican Young Poet this year. Good for him. I enjoy working for him, he's flexible.

DT: It's important to have someone to support you, it's more work than people realise.

BZ: Especially on the night, the stress is too much. I'm a bit of a neurotic person anyway, so easily prone to high-stress for no reason whatsoever.

DT: Neurosis and poetry.

BZ: Oh dammit, I forgot why.

DT: We might have to finish with a reading.

BZ: Sure. Shall we have a song while I search? I really love reading this poem. It's about someone I once met. It's not I don't feel the same, but for those two weeks, I was aflame. This is called Like.

Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.

DT: Thank you for coming, Belinda.

BZ: Thank you for having me, it was good fun.

<u>Part three:</u>

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Travis Alabanza – **TA**

DT: Finally, I'm very pleased to bring you an interview with an amazing artist. I can't state strongly enough how important this person's work is. Travis Alabanza is an actor, writer and performer, general ray of sunshine, and is currently Artist in Residence at London's Tate Britain and recently one third of the superb cast of Putting Words In Your Mouth at Camden Roundhouse. I urge you to make the effort to find Travis' work. Enjoy.

TA: I haven't got a title for this poem yet, so I'm just going to read it.

Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.

DT: Thank you, Travis.

TA: Thank you. Early morning!

DT: There's a bit of building work next door so there may be some sounds while we're chatting, but I don't think it will be too bad. I invite people on the podcasts and I know them really well, but the people listening perhaps don't, so maybe you could you introduce yourself and your work?

TA: My name's Travis Alabanza, for David's friends and non-friends who don't know me. I'm a performance artist that grounds a lot of their work in poetry and spoken word, but I use live performance that varies in theatre or projection or live sounds and music, to try and create a multi-layered experience. If you didn't get it from my poem introduction, I'm kind of black and really queer and really trans and a lot of my work is looking at the intersections of this and how I navigate my daily life.

DT: So it's the 22nd of November as we're chatting and because there's an opening happening tonight, we should maybe start with that.

TA: So on this day, I'm currently trying to calm my nerves via doing a radio interview with a friend, because it's much easier. Tonight is the opening of Putting Words In Your Mouth, which is Scottee's new devised piece of theatre at the Roundhouse. It's been the Roundhouse's main plug show forever, it seems they've been publicising it. It opens tonight and I'm one of three cast members in it.

DT: Those who know your work know you as a solo performer. Is this the first time you've been part of a collaborative work?

TA: No. It's the first time I've done it in a while and the first time people that know me in London, or who know my work or who've caught wind of me in the last two years, probably just see me as a solo performer and I am, but my youth and growing up, my young life – I'm really young, so it sounds weird – but I started in theatre, was based in theatre, that's what I'd always done. I was in loads of devised theatre groups and created loads of shows with people, so it doesn't feel too far from my experience of being young, but kind of feels like jumping back into my A-level Drama class, except this time, I'm paying my rent with it.

It has been hard because since then, I've developed my own artistic voice and my own work and I'm booked as myself. It's been really interesting because when I got the call to say they wanted to give me the job, I was like 'hold on a minute, this is like an acting job, at a theatre, an institution' . I always wanted to be an actor. When I was younger, I thought the only way you could make… I don't know, I thought working-class kids.. Sorry, I'm jumping through loads of different thoughts…

I feel like working-class kids don't get a nuanced representation of what an artist can be. I think anyone gets a weird lens of what an artist can be, but definitely as working-class kids, you don't have an artist in the family trolling around, you don't have links to galleries. I knew I liked to perform. I thought the only way to do that was to be an actor. I didn't realise there was this scene where you're creating your own work. We don't have access to that.

So when I gave up wanting to be an actor because I never thought it was going to happen, I thought that would be it, so it's really weird now jumping back into being on a theatre I would have dreamed of being on, watching how your dreams have completed changed, because I discovered this whole other world of performance that fits me much better.

DT: There's a lot of parallels, although I'm that many years older than you. We started out in the spoken-word scene about the same time and I definitely understand what you mean. I wanted to work in the arts when I was growing up. I had no idea how to do it. I became a carpenter. It wasn't until I found spoken word that I found a way to get into it on my own. Then it opens up and you think 'I could be a writer, nothing's stopping me', except the barriers in my own head.

Although you've acted before, how has the experience been now you've been performing in London so long?

TA: It's different for loads of reasons. One is there's pressure on this piece. From the moment we got the job, it felt like there was pressure, not because of Scottee's name. If you didn't know, Scottee's last show, The Worst Of Scottee, was acclaimed as one of the best new pieces of queer theatre and he's a household queer name. That show was beautiful, so it felt like this was the first show after a hiatus.

So you entered this room on the first day and there was pressure from the get-go, that this was mentally big. You were looking at publicists, looking at how the press was going to release, we had all these different interviews set up. There was that pressure, which as a DIY solo artist that's never been backed institutionally and this is what this show is, it's backed by the Arts Council, by the Roundhouse. This was very new for me, as someone who's always had to do my own promo, find my own venue, get my own generation of interest. It felt very weird. All of that had been done for us. The only thing I had to worry about was my performance, which then put so much stress on my performance.

I think the challenges of working collaboratively with two other solo artists, that's what's hilarious, that the other cast members have talked extensively, all had solo shows, all been for the last two or three years making performance work, and working with Lasana Shabazz, for London performance people, he's been doing this stuff for a while. We're all really good at doing our own work and we all met each other and were like 'ah', but we're actually getting on really, really well because we are all solo performers and we're seeing this as a mini break from having to focus on our own work and just doing someone else's work.

I think collaboration comes with all its challenges. It is still directed and devised by Scotty, whereas with my solo show, at the last minute, before the Monday night we were opening, if I said 'I don't want these lights, we're going to change it', I would change it. But when you've

got an institution behind you, you can't just make changes like that. You have to jump through hoops and hire a tech person. There are so many people around you making decisions, actually it's really hard collaboratively to fit in all those voices. I don't know, I'm learning a lot, but I think it's half my practice.

DT: Would you agree it's a double-edge sword, not always a positive experience getting a big stage?

TA: I'm really nervous. Now I've woken up, I think it isn't always a bed of roses. Although the Roundhouse have been lovely and amazing, like the other week, I hurt my leg in rehearsals really badly, and within an hour, I was at a physio down the road, paid for. That would never happen in other places.

DT: As lovely as Bar Wotever are, there's no physio.

TA: Exactly and the physio was gorgeous and I'm going again today. It's just been booked sorted, dressing room and food and I get to have a can of Coke every day after I perform. All these things institutions can give us that make us feel really nice, but of course for me, it's doubled-edge because we're making a show that's queer and political, whereas before I had no one censoring me, no one telling me 'what if this happens? What if that happens?' It was up to me to take that risk.

I think what I've witnessed is we're still working in an institution, that institution is inherently white, so if you're making a show about race…

DT: We don't have to talk about this production, but is there still a huge difference between what you would consider queer and political and what you're allowed to say?

TA: It depends what space. It's really interesting, because I'm Artist in Residence at the Tate at the moment, so I'm working with these two big institutions at the moment and it's really interesting and not surprising that's a question, because I'm asking myself that question as well: how can I still claim or be or do my radical practice in politics whilst paying my rent through two institutions? I don't know the history of Roundhouse as much, but Tate has a history and is still presently harming people.

The Tate is not a great institution and what I'm learning really quickly is that, for example, I really love my job at the Tate, I love it, I think it's possibly the best thing I've ever done and I'm working in a group of people, the Tate has so many different sections. I've not met half the people who work at the Tate, it's such a big institution, I have no idea who's working there. I'm just in my little bubble of their Education and Learning team, because I work with young people and in there, the first thing we did when we got in on the day was they asked everyone their pronouns and acknowledged the whiteness of the staff.

Since then, we've been able to talk critically about race. They let me do whatever I want. I've been projecting images of Dizzee Rascal, Beyonce, next to Henry Moore sculptures and watching them have a conversation. I had my kids last week turn these really boring rocks in Tate Britain's Sixties' Room. One of the kids said it was a boat, one said it was a shipwreck,

one said it reminded them of Calais. Then we created whole papier-maché thing to Theresa May to say stop deporting people, accept refugees and the Tate let us keep it there for the whole day.

Although I don't think that's radically changing the structures of the Tate, I'm really learning quickly how I can use my practice to push radical politics into the Tate. What does it mean that my workshop at the Tate is loads of kids going round with their Snapchat and face-swapping their faces onto these old, 1800 paintings of old, white Jesus? What does it mean that part of my workshop is finding modern songs that go to old pieces of artwork? So we have this huge speaker that the Tate funds me to have and we're blasting Dizzee Rascal or Juju on that Beat and doing the dance in front of these 1800 pictures, students of colour.

DT: Your experiences will feed into the experience of so many other artists. If you're any form of radical artist, whatever your politics, you might find it difficult to go into an institution.

TA: Definitely.

DT: I worked at the Tate for five years as a technician and knew virtually no one, mainly because we were shut away, doing changeovers. It's such an enormous organisation, there's always going to be a space in there.

TA: Right. It's not like I want to be judgement-free of the people who work there. They're still complicit in something. I just have to work extra-hard to subvert even more. That's the kind of thing, I go in, wow, I've taken this job, it was good for me to take, so I need to fuck it up even more. I do think, you're right, black artists in residence there before, who held radical practices and have had that residency and you can definitely tell when I come in, I can tell they've had a black artist there before and I think it's that thing of shifting the institution.

Although ideally, I'd like to live in a world where we live outside these institutions, we have to pay rent, we have to do these things. I saw it as my ideal end goal is I want to be able to do these workshops I'm doing with these kids without institutional funding myself. I want to create arts summer schools and do these things for kids, but no one's going to fund me unless I've had this experience first, do you know what I mean? I saw it as OK, this is a short-term thing for a long-term solution outside of institutions.

Yes, so hopefully, I think I'm one of the first trans kind of artist residencies at the Tate, I don't think they've had people in these workshops doing dresses and having to account for what that equals and hopefully, we've had conversations about more gender-neutral toilets, things like that, so hopefully that means future artists and customers that come through the Tate will have a different experience.

DT: Have you noticed any change in your writing? I've noticed a really positive difference, it seems much more considered and confident in your ability. How have these public-facing roles and critiquing projects affected your writing?

TA: Thanks for noticing an improvement, I thought I could have improved too. I feel like I'm catching up wit the hype around me. Before, I was playing all these gigs as a poet and

people were calling me a poet and I would tell them I was a performer, because I knew something I could do was perform. Now I know how to do a show. Something I was really doubting, really didn't know if I could do, was write. It felt really dishonest this whole time, getting paid to write and read poems. I was 'are they actually any good?' All these words, you hear other poets, like wow, wow. It's not a wow jealousy, it's a wow, I'm not going to be able to achieve this form of writing.

I think with Barbican Young Poets, I didn't feel it was helping me at the time. Now, looking back, I think it's been the most helpful part of the process and I wish I had the time this year to do it again. It's so interesting because I'm so stubborn and didn't think that at the time. I was like 'they're not letting me talk about performance, they're not letting me do all the sound and the things I do' and it was like no, that's because they're making you a better writer that will in turn create a better practice for you.

It felt so focused on form and structure, that my head was 'I can't do this'. Actually, now I still don't apply a strict form and structure to my work, but through the knowledge of how to do the forms and structures and learn the craft and technique.

DT: I remember having a conversation before you started on how you wanted to focus more on your writing.

TA: And then I got there and I'm a stubborn little shit. I don't feel I took advantage of the space as much as I could of, but I still got a lot out of it, really great friends and beautiful, inspirational poets. I think what I was figuring out with Barbican Young Poets is poetry isn't my practice. I think that's why I was like 'this doesn't fit, I want to do more'. I wasn't figuring out what that looked like. Since then, being Artist in Residency at the Tate, I've really been able to explore my practice.

I have an exhibition coming up in February at Transmissions Gallery in Glasgow, so I'm going to have a month on exhibition, just my work as an artist. I haven't released a lot of my work, but I have a performance piece coming out in January and I think that will be the first time people will really see the new direction my work will take. My poetry's definitely in there, words are in there, but not at the forefront. It's visuals and imagery and I think that's because at Barbican Young Poets, I was so stressed out about not being able to do what I wanted to do, I wasn't just realising that actually, no matter what, in my practice, learning how to write better, will help.

DT: I think it's important to go through those processes that allow you to ask questions of yourself. The working class thing, especially. I didn't do a Fine Art degree which a lot of my contemporaries did. I know how to ask questions because I went through the same process as you did and through this podcast. How do you know what question to ask before that?

TA: It's definitely a working-class thing. A mixture of so many other things, but at the front of it was 'I didn't go to art school', I don't have poets around me at home, I don't have loads of books around me at home. My mum is a beautiful, intelligent woman, but we didn't have time to sit and talk about poetry. You start doubting your work really hard, start second-

guessing your words because I don't use the same words as people because I don't know how to. I don't want to.

I always say I want to read my poem. I was so disinterested with poetry that is read and doesn't land. It sounds pretty but nothing landed on my chest. Nothing felt. I would rather use two-syllable , three-syllable words and it landed with a kid on my council estate back home than go back and be booked for a gig at my council estate, read these poems and everyone's 'what just happened?' But they look really smart. I'm not about that.

I think it's working-class stuff. You want to ask those questions and then you don't, because there's this stubborn prideness in me that is 'I don't want to ask questions because I don't want to seem like I'm not smart'. Actually, there's all these other middle-class kids that have taken up all the space, asking all the questions, getting all the advice, getting all the time, because they knew they could do that. I think it was just learning that it was OK for me to ask questions.

DT: My argument is that anyone who went to art school forgets how terrifying critiquing is, because they do it in the first term. Touching on Barbican Young Poets, I would recommend to a lot of artists trying to write poetry in some form, because going through the process of having all the rules makes you question what parts of your work are functioning. Writing poetry is a really good way into performing art because there are so many strict rules.

TA: Definitely, I agree. I wish there was a space somewhere, maybe there are, I don't know, where you could get your work critiqued as you're writing it. You have to set up everything with friends, like 'could you edit this work?' I wish there was a space where we were submitting work and people were just being honest and 'have you thought about this?' I'm lacking that at the moment. I have no editor.

DT: I've got groups of friends where I can do that. We meet informally but fairly regularly, but there is space for a collective of artists. One problem is you either get groups of writers meeting or performers, but very rarely do you get a space where people can go with different ideas and have a flexible practice within it.

TA: Exactly. I feel like writing just for it to be on page. At the moment, I'm being requested to write for different journals and things and that's been a really interesting experience, because I've been thinking about my words so much more. I think my work looks so, so different on page and people have read my work, then seen that same piece performed and been wow, it's a completely different reading of it'.

The other day, I went to a gig, I was doing Queer'Say at the Free Word Centre and the sound was not great, so I said 'do you know what? I'm not going to do sounds, I'm just going to read some poems'. I read this poem that people have heard so many times with sound. I did it without and Dean was like 'wow, I got a completely different meaning from it. I've been angry when I heard it before, now I want to cry.'

I was like 'wow, I don't need to do this to sound anymore'.

DT: That sums up the change in your work. It's so much more with the sound, but also stands alone without it. Saying that, I think we should wrap up with a reading.

TA: OK. I just wrote this yesterday and I want to read stuff that hasn't been edited and I don't know what it's like. It's called Preparation and I was thinking about it when I went to a sexual health clinic yesterday. I was thinking about prep and drugs and all that stuff.

Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.

DT: Thank you very much. I'm really excited about January, to see your new work.

TA: Yeah, it's called Burgers. That's such a weird way to end. Thanks, it's called Burgers. Bye everyone.

End of transcript.