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This transcript was made possible with the aid of funding from Arts Council England.

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Episode 22 - Spoken Word Istanbul (April 2015)
Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**
Guest: Justin Pahl – **JP**
Guest: Lydia Beardmore – **LB**
Guest: Johnny Day – **JD**
Guest: Eric James Beyer – **EJB**
Guest: Mosab Al-Nomaire – **MA**

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Podcast. For this episode I am in fucking Istanbul, which is amazing. Today I am joined by the host of Spoken Word Istanbul, Justin Pahl, and also by some other poets, who are lurking behind the microphone - Mosab Al-Nomaire, Lydia Beardmore, Johnny Day and Eric James Beyer. They will be on later.

Today we have a slightly different format. We're going to have a shorter interview and a two-part open mic thing. If it fails and sounds terrible, it's my fault, not the poets' fault. Say hello, everybody.

All: Hello!

DT: See? I wasn't lying. So I've come all the way to the edge of Asia to interview some poets, I can't believe it. Justin, I'd like you to give us a short introduction to yourself and what you do.

JP: My name is Justin Pahl, I grew up in Indiana, went to school in Philadelphia. I have been living in Istanbul for two years. I'm a writer and editor, mostly I do prose, novels, a bit of journalism here and there. I make money by editing because it's really hard to make money by writing. I used to write a lot more poetry, but I still read a good amount of it and write it and I'm the host of Spoken Word.

DT: I was about to say you obviously don't sound very Turkish. How did you end up in Istanbul, firstly? Also, how have you ended up hosting Spoken Word Istanbul?

JP: It's a bit of a long story, I will try to condense it. I was living in Philadelphia with a woman and we were planning to move to Argentina together, so I had a lot of money. I was delivering pizza and working at a golf course and we were saving up, and then she left me, so I made a logical decision to move to a Greek island and write a novel, which I think is what you do when you're heartbroken.

So I went to the island of Rhodes for three months and I painted houses and started writing a book. I had about a month's worth of money left after that, so I said you know what? I've never been to Istanbul, I would like to go. So I came here and really fell in love with it. That was over two years ago now. So I found work and I stayed. About a month after I got here, a friend who was passing through said oh, you should check out this open mic night.

I'd never heard of it, but we went to Spoken Word Istanbul, which at the time was at the Kooperatif Performance Arts Centre, which I don't think is there anymore. I met the host Merve Pehlivan, a Turkish woman, and we became good friends. When she went to Paris last fall, she asked me to take over Spoken Word.

DT: There's a connection there with a former guest we've had, Pat Cash, who started Spoken Word Paris. You can't move anywhere without someone who's been through Spoken Word Paris. There are a lot of people passing through it.

JP: We routinely have guests coming down from Paris who have gone to Spoken Word there and are asking to perform here and of course, Merve got the idea for it, she studied in Paris, I think it was six years ago now, and Spoken Word was just starting there. With the idea, she came back to Istanbul and started Spoken Word Istanbul here.

DT: Were you involved with Spoken Word at all before you came? Did you start performing spoken word in Istanbul?

JP: I did, yeah. I hadn't been involved in it before.

DT: But had you, even as an audience member, had you seen much before you came?

JP: Not much. I would go to readings occasionally in Philadelphia, see poets, see writers there as well. I had a very strange view of writing for a while, I thought it wasn't very collaborative, I thought you just holed up in a room and wrote. You do some of that.

DT: Sitting in a tower, weeping.

JP: Yeah, effectively! Heartbroken and feeling miserable. Actually, it's much better when it's shared with people and you realise that it helps to get feedback and have people who edit and tell you when you suck and tell you when it's good. Coming here has been really revelatory for me in that sense. Now I am involved in a community of writers. I never had that before.

DT: How critical is the scene here, in terms of receiving constructive criticism from other writers and performers?

JP: At Spoken Word itself, it's very supportive because I think going up on stage, as most people here will attest, is harrowing.

DT: Actually yeah, since we have five other poetic minds in the room, I don't want to shut them off completely... Does anyone else have any input in terms of the critiquing of work?

LB: Here, it is very supportive because getting up on stage in the first place is quite scary. I think at Spoken Word also, there are often a lot of first-timers, more than any other open mic I have been to, so it's more about giving support.

DT: I've spoken to a lot of poets in London about that fact, how you have Spoken Word London, which performs a pretty similar role and you're applauded just for getting up. I always compare it to amateur boxing. You're applauded for getting in the ring. You don't have to be good. If you get knocked out, it doesn't matter, if you're brave enough to get up and do it.

And Poetry Unplugged, which is pretty much where everybody reads for the first time because if you Google Spoken Word London or Poetry open mics, it's the first result, and everyone goes to Unplugged. But I find it interesting to ask, do you find there's a need for a more critical space? Do you feel like there should be a space you could go to be tested a bit more, pushed on what your ideas are?

JP: I think, and Johnny, Eric and I have talked about this a lot, there are spoken word pieces and then there's a lot of the other stuff you do. A Spoken Word piece tends to have a lot of emotional highs. It tends to be very brief. A lot of stuff we really value and work on, we don't perform at Spoken Word because it's not the proper venue for it.

Outside of Spoken Word, through people I've met there, like Johnny, like Eric, like some of the other writers who aren't here, I have found a very critical community. Johnny is great and if he likes something of mine I know it's really good because he doesn't like a lot of my stuff. I value that.

DT: Does that mean then that Spoken Word is a more critical space, it's just that you find the conversations after the event? I don't mean you should go into an event and read and people slate your poems, it's maybe just that that community is formed around the event.

JP: It's not critical in the first instance. Like we said, it's very supportive. People will come up to you and talk to you and maybe say this was good and they'll encourage you. Maybe you make friends and can meet with those people, then it becomes a smaller group of more critical individuals. There's that extended community where we actually bolster each other and push each other a bit. But in that large Spoken Word space, it's generally positive.

DT: It's there if you want to search it out. Does anyone have any experience of how the spoken word scene here compares to other places?

LB: Yes, it's very different, actually. I was in the Bristol spoken word scene largely and even in London. I would say London is very competitive and more of a slam scene, so actually you are competing with each other.

DT: Plus everyone wants to be famous there. Because they're fucking twats.

LB: I would say the English scene, the Bristol scene and the London scene, have a far more performance edge to them. In Istanbul, I don't often see people memorise their poems, whereas in Bristol and London, that's what people do. I think it has more vulnerability to it, it feels more intimate here.

DT: Is it more of a recital scene?

LB: I would say yeah, it's not as performance-based. It's good.

JP: Yeah and again, I wasn't intimately involved in the writing team in Philadelphia, I was relatively young, but having friends who've been involved in it, especially in New York, San Francisco, one of the major complaints they've had is how competitive it is. You have somebody up there and the entire room is hoping that they bomb because there is this inherent competitiveness there and everyone there is thinking I'm better than this person, I want to succeed and have them fail.

One of the things I have really liked about the scene here in Istanbul, and this was from the beginning, is how supportive it is. There's not a lot of jealousy and that's really healthy.

DT: It's interesting. I find it strange with the scene in London because it's both supportive and competitive. Because it's such a big city, there's a lot going on, you can find both of those things. If you want to get involved with the slam stuff and be very competitive, you can. If you want to be more performance-based, you can, but there is also a very competitive performance scene as well, where a lot of people may hope you bomb.

JP: Some people like that and some people thrive off that and some people don't. I get very nervous when I read, so that would make me choke and fail and it would be terrible.

DT: On that note, would you like to read a poem?

JP: Sure.

DT: We're going to start with Justin, then I'll introduce the poets as we go round. I'm going to introduce everybody on first-name terms and in the description for the video, we will have everybody's full names and contact details. But today, we are all good friends, bonding over poetry.

JP: This is a poem called Creation Myths.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you, Justin. And now, Mosab.

MA: Three That You Shouldn't Open

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you Mosab. And now we're going to have Lydia.

LB:

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you, Lydia. And now Johnny.

JD: This piece is called I Am A Teacher.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you, Johnny. You said shit quite a lot there. Fucking hell. Now a poem from Eric.

EJB: This is called Common Sense.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you very much. Thank you everybody. I meant to say at the beginning, if you want to applaud afterwards, then feel free. It would seem really patronising if you did it now, so let's move on. There were a lot of references [to Istanbul] there. Do most of you feel now that Istanbul is almost your muse?

JP: It's the only muse.

DT: I was going to say, I've only been here a few days, but it does feel like Istanbul wants to destroy you.

JD: Welcome**.**

EJB: We always say you're either on top of the city or it's on top of you.

JD: Apparently, Fatih Sultan Mehmet said that way before us.

EJB: That was in 1453, he invaded the city. Before he invaded the city, he said 'either I conquer the city or it conquers me.' I think that idea really is prevalent. You live here and you start to feel that. It almost feels…

JD: Didn't we describe Istanbul as being an abusive relationship you can't quite leave?

DT: Is it frustrating or have you just come to terms with it? Is that just the way it is?

JP: There are days that are really frustrating. There are days when you just want to scream and you want to be anywhere else. Then there are days when you couldn't imagine anywhere else in the world being any better. I find there's not a lot of in-between space.

DT: It's quite extreme isn't it, it's black and white here, really polarised. It's amazing, but it terrifies me. Not just the taxis, either. I want to ask a quick question about how the scene is formed over here. Lydia mentioned slam poetry in London. Is there any kind of slam scene here at all?

EJB: This is the only spoken-word thing in the city.

JP: In English. I don't know as much about what is being done in Turkish. Lydia is doing work as well with the refugee centre, I don't know what events you guys are doing, but if you want to talk about that, you might know more than me.

LB: Yes. We organised a big spoken-word event. Mosab was there. I used to teach a poetry class at a refugee-run centre for Syrian and Palestinian refugees and we organised a spoken word night with a zine launch. We did that last week. Again, it was very un-competitive, very much 'read what you want', no judgment, no prizes. I bought people beer.

JP: As far as I know, there's not much of a slam scene.

DT: The few points you just made there run neatly into the next two questions. The poetry scene here, is it predominantly English language-based, do you think? I mean, it probably is for you guys because that's what you attend.

JP: For us.

EJB: Spoken Word allows anyone to speak in any language, and we do have that.

JP: It does. You do have people who will perform. Not as many as before. I know when Merve was there, it was much better as people would perform in Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, French, Spanish. So it is open to anyone to read in whatever language they would like, but our experience of the scene is definitely more heavily English-based, just because that's what we're writing in and what we're reading.

DT: I was just wondering if there is any resentment? Within the community of Turkish writers?

JP: I've never felt it. We've gotten nothing but support. Again, my sense of the different literary groups in the city, and again, it's a very fractured, small knowledge, is that they're very diffuse and there isn't a ton of overlap that goes on. There's not a ton of centralisation. So you have a lot of smaller movements, but not any larger, centralised one.

EJB: I may be jumping the gun here, but there's a certain sense that artistic movements have to stay underground because they're kind of suppressed and it's not overly encouraged. There's a sense they are disparate for a reason. When some people come to Spoken Word, they are sort of amazed that they have a platform. No matter how uncompetitive or whatever, it's just a nice place to be.

DT: It does seem that anything that would happen in Istanbul would be fractured anyway because the city is in pieces.

JP: I also think the areas in the city that have people who are doing more artistic things tend to be relatively small. You have here Beyoglu, Taksim, you have Kadikoy on the other side. Those are the main districts where you're going to have artists congregating, I think. For as big as the city is, I often have it happen, and I'm sure you guys too, where I'll be out in Kadikoy and I'll run into someone I know on the street. Probably about 50% of the time I go out, I run into someone I know. So in terms of the areas where people involved with the arts congregate in the city, it's not that big.

DT: My next question was, the connection was to Lydia, in talking about the programmes with refugees. I was wondering, and this is more of a long-term view, how the spoken word scene here has been affected by events in Syria, for example, and neighbouring countries?

JP: Mosab may be the guy to talk somewhat about that.

MA: There's around 1,700,000 Syrian refugees here. I'm one of them. There are so many Syrian refugees living here in Istanbul, but most of the Syrian people who come here to Istanbul look to Turkey in general as a station to go to another place.

DT: An entry point?

MA: Yes. As an example, to Europe. They are looking for papers and passports and a place to live.

DT: It's also about the subject matter of poetry, how that is reflected here. A lot of poetry in the UK reflects heavily people's opinions on foreign policy and what might be happening in the lives of refugees, but it's very easy in Britain to talk about it because you're on an island in the North Sea, and you're very removed from it. You can sort of take the moral high ground because it doesn't affect you in any way unless people actually make it to Britain, which happens rarely. So I was wondering, because, if you talk about issues here, I assume you have to do it in a very serious way because you're going to meet these people very often. You're going to be held accountable. You have a very different audience here geographically.

JP: It depends. There is a lot of turnover in the audience, there are probably a couple of dozen people who have been going for a long time and come more or less every time. Then you have a lot of students or artists passing through once in a while. We've had a couple of people come and read, Mosab being one of them, who are refugees. We had a woman a while back who came and sang a really beautiful song, a Syrian woman.

It is strange, for me at least, being in the city because you know you are bordering a country that is at war, but you don't necessarily feel that here. There is not really an awareness of that going on. People tend to go about their lives and you're out in the city and you see that. It's a strange disjunction for me and it's not that different from how I imagine it feels being in London, honestly, in terms of life, commerce, it keeps going on, apart from the fact you do see the Syrians out in the street. But how that affects daily life here, I'm not entirely sure, honestly.

LB: I think you get more of, depending on your circles, at least from what I've experienced, it's not so much about what's going on in the actual country because we're so far removed from that, but what happens after that, what life is like, what it's like to try to get to Europe, to try and get a passport, what it's like to live in a city that doesn't really want you, what it's like to leave your home and culture behind, all of this, that's the part of it we see more of, not so much the stuff that's going on in the country. I think we have quite a unique viewpoint on the situation in Istanbul and being around it.

JP: It does also, at the same time, as Mosab said, the city in some ways does function as something of a way station for a lot of people who are coming and trying to go out, and conversely, coming and trying to get in.

DT: My next question doesn't relate to poetry so much. In a way, it would relate to any creative process, the question of place. Growing up in Britain, in the purely geographical sense, I have always seen Turkey as being European as a land mass. Not culturally, but as a

land mass being part of Europe. I've been very surprised talking to Turkish and Syrian people in Turkey, that they don't view themselves as Turkish at all and don't really view themselves as Asian either.

There really is this sense that it's this in-between station. I suppose it's always been that. I'm just surprised by this attitude. How do you think that affects the way people view art in general here? It must lead to a certain isolation. I wonder whether that frees you or traps you?

JP: I'm always wary, even as an outsider, to discuss how people who grew up here and who lived here, feel about this place because ultimately, I don't know.

DT: Sorry, I'll clarify that, I don't mean people who grew up here. I mean Istanbul, which doesn't contain people necessarily who grew up here because we're talking as a group of artists and writers and refugees and tourists and students, and that's what I mean. The arts scene, the literature scene, we can talk purely about poetry if it's easier and narrows it down.

JD: When I moved here, I was impressed and inspired that there is still a spirit of revolution here, actually the belief that revolution can do something. I wouldn't go so far as to say people are completely jaded in the UK, but there's a certain sense it's almost post-revolutionary world, that they've got enough freedoms, whereas here, it's a necessity that they fight. That feeds into the art and they do literally have to fight for their art sometimes.

JP: I do remember I had just got here when the protests in 2013 started up. That was such an all-consuming thing. And it felt like, when you're in the midst of that, nothing else outside it could matter. Then there was that realisation that it didn't matter that much in the larger world context and that the world kept moving on and the government kept moving on. I think that was a question a lot of people here had to grapple with afterwards, which was, this really important, seemingly seminal event just kind of ended and nothing changed.

People have been grappling with how do we make things change and how do we deal with the sense of disappointment which came about from that? Again, that's a question I think someone who spent a lot more time in Istanbul would be better qualified to answer.

DT: On the topic of senses of disappointment, we're going to have some more poems.

JP: Great segway. This is a much shorter poem and it's called Snow. I wrote it after we got a very beautiful snowstorm here about a month ago.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you, Justin. Now Eric.

EJB: This piece is called Duty.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you, Eric. Now Johnny.

JD: This is called Why Do We Speak These Words We Write?

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

This is called The Crux.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you, Johnny. Now Lydia.

LB:

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you very much. And finally, Mosab.

MA: This is a poem talking about home.

[We are unable to reproduce this reading at this time.]

DT: Thank you very much, that was really nice. Not that they weren't all very nice, obviously, I'm not singling anybody out. I wouldn't do that. I am highly professional. I normally finish off asking my guests what their influences have been and what their recommendations would be for people to check out. I don't want to leave anyone out, so we'll leave the influences. If anyone wants to recommend to the listeners anything that's happening in Istanbul that people should check out, it doesn't have to be poetry related, just arts-based.

JP: The one guy I recommend you speak to, I think he's doing some interesting stuff in terms of just sharing literature, is Karim Gunes, who runs an organisation called Book Surf. It's a free book-trading company here in Istanbul. You sign up for it and any book they have, you meet with the person and exchange books, then you meet two weeks later to exchange back and talk about it. He's a really interesting guy and it's a great way to meet interesting people who either share your taste in literature or might introduce you to something new.

DT: Anybody else? Officially, with that blank stare, that's the finish. I just want to thank you Mosab, Lydia, Johnny, Eric and of course Justin, the host of Spoken Word Istanbul. If anybody here in the room has any blogs or contact information, it will go in the video description. Check out Spoken Word Istanbul on Facebook, that's what I did.

JP: @ Spoken Word Istanbul, you can find us that way on Facebook. And we meet every three weeks at Arsen Lupen.

End of transcript.