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Playwright's Podcast Season 5 – Transcription Jude Christian episode

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SS Welcome to a special series of the Royal Court Theatre's Playwright's Podcast in association with the Stückemarkt of Berliner Theatertreffen, with me, Simon Stephens.

For sixty-five years the Royal Court Theatre in London has led the world in the production of new plays and the discovery and championing of new playwrights.

The Stückemarkt of the Theatertreffen is an annual gathering of new writers and theatre makers. Every year since 1978, writers are chosen by Stückemarkt jurors from hundreds of applications to visit Berlin and perform, talk about and celebrate their work. With the 2019 Stückemarkt, the competition was launched for the first time world-wide.

In this short series of podcasts the Royal Court Theatre and the Stückemarkt at the Theatertreffen collaborate for the first time. This year as Berlin, like the rest of the world, manages the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, the six writers whose work has been chosen, will be discussing their work in this special series of five, hour long, online conversations.

Over the course of the last decade Jude Christian has established herself as one of the most exciting directors, dramaturgs, and theatre makers in British theatre. She has directed at most of the major theatres in London, staging new plays at the Royal Court Theatre and the Gate, and she has reimagined Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Macbeth* at the Lyric Hammersmith; she has worked as a dramaturg at the Globe on the banks of the Thames and written and directed *Dick Whittington*, a raucous and magnificent panto, that peculiar Christmas extension of the popular music hall cabaret that defines the theatrical experience in the United Kingdom and entirely baffles the rest of the world. She was made Associate Director of Home in Manchester at the end of the last decade. I worked with her on the 2017 production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* at the Lyric Hammersmith, where she was Associate Director. She was a collaborator of rigour, intelligence and imagination, with a searing sense of truth.

Over the course of the last decade she has written and developed and performed a quite shattering and unique piece of theatre. *Nanjing* dramatizes her own exploration of her own history. It is a moving portrayal of her discovery in her twenties of the atrocities that are in England described as the Rape of Nanking, that were carried out against the Chinese people of her grandparent's generation. It is also a play about the last decade and how in that decade the world's sense of its own history has on

occasion dug its heels in to notions of simplicity when what was maybe needed was a human acceptance of contradiction. It is a play about the brutality of war in the last century that crystallises in a felt and powerful creed for the urgent need for peace as we embark on our third baffling decade of this one. She performs the piece herself with poise and clarity. It is one of the judges choices for this year's Stückemarkt. Jude Christian welcome to the Royal Court Playwright's Podcast, and welcome to the Stückemarkt.

JC Nice to virtually see you.

SS Nice to virtually see you. How're you virtually doing?

JC Alright. Yeah... you know... We live in a box on a computer screen, which... it's alright isn't it? There are worse places to be living.

SS Is that a happy place for you to be living? A box on a computer screen. Does it have its advantages as well as its disadvantages?

JC Yeah, I mean, I think it does. I think we've all been doing a lot of stocktaking in the last year, haven't we? In amongst the basic fights for survival in our varying, different ways.

But there's something very interesting... As somebody who has done a job that has always involved having to physically be in the same room as the things that you're making, and also necessarily involved a lot of running around all over the place – being forced to live in one room and communicate with everything through a box – there are there are definitely social and artistic possibilities that have opened up through that, I think, which is exciting,

SS A different way of thinking when you're moved away from that freneticism maybe? A kind of stillness perhaps?

JC Yeah. And I mean, on a very "life" level, a sense of rootedness in a place that I haven't really had for, I think, most of my adult life. I think I lived in 15 different houses in 10 years when I lived in London, I've technically lived in Salford for five years, but I spent at least three or four of those years away so much that I was subletting other places to live in. So actually living inside my own flat for a year, and walking around the streets of the immediate area in which I live has been properly nice.

SS I don't know if you've heard any of the podcasts that we've done in the past at the Royal Court, but I always used to start the podcast with exactly the same question. And I've decided for these special Stückemarkt episodes to start with... exactly the same question, which is: when was the first time that you ever went to the theatre?

JC Ah, good question. I remember going to see... I think it was Philip Schofield in *Joseph and his Technicolour Dreamcoat*. I'm going to say that I was 4. The main reason I'm going to say that is because there was a giant camel, like a big 2D camel, and when it came on stage I cried and hid under my chair. And I remember this real feeling of injustice because my mum was basically like "get out from under your chair" And I was like "the camel is terrifying!"

So I'm gonna say that I was 4 because if I was any older than that it would be mildly humiliating. So yeah: 4 years old, *Joseph*..., great.

SS I mean, I'm sure there's something about two dimensional camels and Phillip Schofield combined having their own particular terror nowadays as well!

Where would you have seen that?

JC I must have seen it in Coventry. I lived in Coventry till I was six. I've not got a great memory or sense of geography generally. But I remember it was quite a large venue. It had seats that felt comforting to hide underneath.

SS Was theatre a big thing for you when you were growing up? When you were at school? Was directing or acting or writing something that you did?

JC Yeah, definitely. I didn't go to the theatre lots, apart from, you know, in the continued vein of *Joseph*.... I remember going to see *Cats* at some point, on a big trip to London or something. But I would say that my main experiences of something approaching theatre as I was growing up were: dramas in church, the Mursley village show, which is a phenomenon all of its own, where basically in the village that we moved to when I was six years old, once a year there would be a show that was like a sketch show where people would unironically sing songs from the Wurzels and make jokes about the people from the next village being inbred... and that kind of thing. I was in love with musicals. I was obviously determined to be in *Les Mis*.... And me and my nextdoor neighbour would play songs on the piano together. So I really remember in one of these village shows the two of us demanding that we were given five minutes to perform the entirety of the Elephant Love Medley from *Moulin Rouge*, which we just sort of... sang together and everyone tolerated it. I think I knew I was destined to be in musicals. I used to make up plays all the time. I used to make up stories.

But weirdly I didn't really connect that in my head. I think I also just didn't think I was any good at anything to do with theatre. And for secondary school, I went to an all-girls school, and it really felt like one of those places where if you were good at acting, what it meant was you were probably blonde, definitely good at crying on cue and doing an American accent. And I was someone who just always got cast as the boy or the narrator. And I thought "okay, cool. This is my life". And I had this really amazing drama teacher who was like, "oh, I think you're actually quite good at this" And I wasn't normally told that I was good at things that were creative, so I really held it. And it opened up this very strange vortex. At this point I was 14 or 15, and I went home and said to my mum "I'm gonna do drama" and my parents said "please don't! Get a real job!" So I fought with them for years and years, and they became very entrenched in the growing terror that I might do theatre as a career, which was horrifying. I was like, "I don't even know what theatre is. But now I want to do it."

And then I sort of compromised, and I went to uni to study English, and in my head I still thought "I will somehow be in theatre", and I got there and joined the theatre society and there were all these people who suddenly said "I'm directing a play". And I didn't realise that that was a thing you could do! This was what I'd been doing in my head the whole time. You can read a play and then you can be the person who says "guys, I think here are some ways that we could take this play off the page and put it in real life" So it wasn't until I was in my early 20s that I realised what I wanted to be

was was a director, at that point. I've now weirdly come full circle and started writing and even being in things again.

SS And it's only a matter of time until you're in musical theatre again.

JC That is what the world deserves!

SS What was the village you grew up? That you went to as an adolescent?

JC Mursley. Rhymes with Dursley, that other well-known place. It's outside Milton Keynes.

SS So for people listening in Germany...

JC It's an hour north of London, and depending on how much you want people to feel sorry for you, you either say: it's just outside Milton Keynes... the most nothing place on the planet. Or... it's in the Northern home countries. And it's a rural village. In which case you're suddenly incredibly posh.

SS Did you enjoy the rural element of that life having been born in Coventry? Do you remember it being different? Yeah, I remember Coventry as – I'm actually back here at the moment. Weirdly this week I'm doing some workshopping on *Nanjing* in Coventry – I remember Coventry being pretty grey. I think that's also to do with where we lived. My main recollection is once every so often as a treat – my mum really hated McDonald's but she was quite into McDonald's breakfast – and we would go on like a family trip for a McDonald's breakfast. And I really remember walking over a dual carriageway to get there. And it being this idyllic day out.

So yes, the ruralness of Mursley... it is beautiful. You're surrounded by fields and sheep and all of those things. It's not particularly wild. For example, the Isle of Man, which we will talk about shortly. It doesn't have that same sense of being breathtaking. But around places like Aylesbury Vale, the sun over the fields is completely gorgeous. But I lived there from the age of 6 to 18 so I have absolutely no desire to go and live in a small village again anytime soon.

SS Where did you go to university?

JC Exeter. So I picked, basically, the equivalent of a small village outside Milton Keynes to go to university in. Not to slag of Exeter. It was lovely. But I hadn't really thought about how far away from everything Devon was when I decided to go there.

SS And did you start directing at university? So it was in your early 20s, so it was while you were an undergraduate? Do you remember any particularly exciting discoveries as a student director? People listening to this can't tell that you're chuckling at that idea. But actually, the work that we do at university can be really key or transformative.

JC I think so. I think my knowledge of theatre wasn't particularly broad. And there was a sort of weird thing that happened to me with theatre, where I think there were certain elements of theatre that I really fell in love with at school, and it took me a very long time to find those things in real life. So for example in sixth form I remember studying *Waiting for Godot*, and having this brilliant drama teacher who said "the way *Waiting for Godot* functions as a play is, when you're watching it, you are bored

and angry and confused, and everything feels meaningless. And then every so often, you think that maybe you've understood it, and then the rug gets pulled out from under you, and it just becomes meaningless again, and sometimes that's quite funny. And sometimes it's annoying. And other times you're furious…" And she said "that's what it was like to be alive in World War Two"

SS Or now!

JC Exactly!

And I thought "I want to make theatre that does that!" I want to make theatre where people are *in* something, and that doesn't explain itself to them, but just *is* itself at them. And I didn't understand how to make that work. And I didn't really understand how to find it…

Quite a long time after I left uni, I went and saw a show by Complicité, which I think was my first experience really of seeing something that wasn't a musical or linear naturalism.

SS Complicité, major international theatre company based in England. Led by Simon McBurney, the artistic director. What was the show that you saw?

JC I saw *A disappearing Number*.

My sense is, with Complicité, that with the first show you see, if you felt it was a transformative thing, you think "that's the one!" and everything that came after is not as interesting. And I think that is just a generational thing whereby whichever was your first one is the one that you're like "Yep. That. That's the one"

But I would say what I made at uni was… I would say I made theatre in the way that I had understood theatre to be, which was linear naturalism.

I directed two shows actually in quite quick succession, because two things happened. I directed a production of *the House of Bernarda Alba*, which was a brilliant learning curve. It was essentially just me being terrified by lots of drama students because I was an English student, and I was with all the dramas students who were asking "why aren't we rehearsing?" And I was like "I don't know what that is! Can't we just talk about the play…?" And they would ask me for exercises and I was like "I don't know what you want from me!"

SS I've definitely worked with professional theatre directors in English theatre who've directed in a very similar way. I won't mention any names!

JC There was something sort of beautifully demystifying about it. Because I sat them down and said "ok, fine, I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. What do you want? And they were like "can't you like ask us questions about the character?" And I was like "oh! GCSE drama hot-seating! Fine. You should have said! I'm sorry, I assumed there was something mystical here"

And then the other thing that I directed very soon after… my mate and I from home, so back in Milton Keynes, or Aylesbury, where we went to school. He was like "you like theatre, I like theatre. There's not much going on here. Let's set up a theatre company" So we set up a theatre company in our summer holiday, in my old school

Hall, got some money off the local council and we staged a full length production of the musical *City of Angels* with a company of 50 16 to 21 year olds, all of whom had never made theatre before. I directed it, having directed literally nothing. We put it on in 10 days. I had a proper baptism of fire. And it was it was great. And from that point, I knew I liked this and I wanted to get good at it.

The next thing I did was I decided to go to drama school. I think because I'd been scarred by my experience with the drama students and felt I didn't know enough. And clearly this was a thing that you had to know things in order to do!

But I think this was probably a formative point. I kept trying to describe to people the kind of theatre I was looking for, even when I was at drama school. I was saying I wanted a longer rehearsal process, I wanted to not just put the stage directions on stage. I'd like to be able to rip a play apart, get under its skin, not just for the sake of it, but to create something that feels like a new act of creation in a more radical way, maybe, than some of the things I had seen. And so people kept saying to me "you'd really like German theatre!", or they'd be like, "oh... you'd really like *German* theatre...". And so I thought "there's a sign here!" and I went and lived in Berlin for a bit.

Now I wouldn't particularly characterise my work as being German in whatever the hell way that is interpreted. I think I still sit very much in the tradition in which I was raised. But that was definitely a useful turning point in accepting that some of the questions I have about the more formally traditional work I have grown up in have been answered by seeing a very different national approach to the theatre making.

SS When I first went to the Theatertreffen, and to the Stückemarkt around the Theatertreffen in 2008, nobody in British theatre had the slightest idea what it was, by the time I was going there in 2012/13/14, you couldn't move for young British theatre directors. I'm sure you were probably one of them!

JC So I went there in 2011. But I knew I wasn't capable of going over and being like, "hello, I'd like to network and make some theatre here" So basically, I lived there for nearly a year, cleaning people's houses and babysitting, and I'd save up all my euros and go see theatre, but sort of just like a visitor the whole time. But then what happened was I came back and exactly as you're describing that boom had happen and people kept saying "oh, Jude knows all about German theatre..." And I was like " I mean, I've seen some theatre in Germany. It's good. Yeah, sure, give me a job. It's great..."

SS The last 10 years, from your return in 2012, from Berlin, to the start of the pandemic, has seen you establish yourself, as I said, in the introduction, as a director of real significance.

Of the work that you've made in that time, is there a particular work as a director that you think crystallises the attempts that you've made to make theatre from a directorial point of view? And I'm asking you to distil 10 years of work into one or maybe two shows. But before we talk about *Nanjing*, it'd be interesting to get that sense.

JC I'm gonna say a really annoying thing, which is like, I think that it's only the collection of work and the ways in which they're quite different, that I think represents a directorial approach.

As I'm sure it has come across in the way that I've described my career, I don't think I was ever someone who had a real compelling sense of who they were as an artist, and even less than that, a sense of like, how to get a room full of other people on board with what that was. And I think, oddly, the work that I make that feels like it pulls together the most strands of who I am as a person, and by extension as an artist is panto. Panto is one of the closest things that conventional British theatre has to German Theatre in the sense that you'd be chatting away to the audience and then you'd stop halfway through act 2 and play a game.

SS For listeners in Germany, who really don't know what we're talking about, panto is a traditional Christmas form of theatre that's really central to the UK's sense of self. And when I've done these podcasts in the past, and I asked people what's the first piece of theatre they've been to it's almost Invariably some form of panto. They take stories from... what are at the roots of the stories? I guess they're English folk stories.

JC But there's Aladdin as well!

SS Randomly!

And tales from the Brothers Grimm as well. But they put them to music, often using contemporary pop songs. They're riddled with jokes, which children don't understand to be filthy, but their parents really enjoy because they're really filthy. There's audience interaction, and it's all celebratory and in the build up to Christmas.

And what is it that brings the best of you as an artist out in something like *Dick Whittington*?

JC It's multifaceted formally. It's commedia dell'arte. It's variety show. It's music hall. It's stand-up. It's shameless moralising. And it's a fabulous musical. And I think that that interest in pulling different things from different places... There's also, I guess, having grown up in in a community, and a sort of cultural landscape that was not particularly theatre savvy, or literary. Like, I didn't understand contemporary theatre. For example I once had this interview where this person said "I asked you to come in with a modern play and you've brought *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*", because that was the most modern thing I'd ever read. So I did quite a lot of catching up. And I think I was aware of wanting to make theatre for myself as a 15 year old, or all of my friends still now from that place.

Which is not to say that other, more formally challenging forms of theatre can't be widely accessible. But I sort of almost wanted to do subversion by stealth, and that is what panto is built for. And I think that, for example, particularly at the moment when we're in a really, really complex place about ownership of tradition, stories, culture and space in this country, there's something really brilliant about being able to take a story like Cinderella, and just stare down the barrel of the audience and be like "this is about how when people love each other, isn't that a beautiful thing?" And to cast more than just one heterosexual cisgender central white couple for example.

And I think it allows for a bit of a release valve in terms of talking about politics and the frustrations of it. It allows space for catharsis like doing *Dick Whittington* last year at the National in the middle of all things Coronavirus, felt hugely poignant. But you dress it all up in glitter and songs and silliness.

And it feels like something which is also forcibly trying to talk to as diverse a room as possible, particularly in terms of age. It's something that is trying to speak to 5 year-olds and parents and grandparents and people who don't consider themselves part of a family but come along with friends, and all of these different things.

It's joyous.

JC That's a really beautiful description of its glory, I think.

SS In UK theatre I think, to a degree that's different to Germany, and certainly different to other European countries, the demarcations between who is a director and who is a writer, who is a dramaturg, who is an actor or performer, seem traditionally to be slightly clearer. So, I remember when you first told me you'd written a piece, and I, you know, being a 40 year old bloke, thought "you're a director! What were you doing writing?!"

But tell me about the very first starting points of why you decided you wanted to write?

JC I mean, I like words. I really like what you can do with them. I also really like sound my own voice. I've been told this my entire life...

I actually think it's partly because of that thing you've described within British theatre. I really remember having quite a few conversations with people who were like "pick one. I need to know what pigeonhole you're in" or "concentrate on something"

So firstly, it took me quite a long time to understand the different ways in which you can be a director. And as I say, I think this is incredibly reductive, but I think there is one approach to directing that is more considering yourself an interpreter of a writer's text, and somebody whose job is to render that text in artistic collaboration with a team, but in service of that pre existing authorial voice, or even an authorial voice in the room. And I still love working on projects like that. I still love working with writers, where am I like "tell me what you want this baby to be in the room" And then the creative force for me is us figuring out how to do that perfectly. I also think, particularly through my relationship with Vicki at the Royal Court.

SS Vicki Featherston, the artistic director.

JC I believe her instincts for the kinds of writers that I'd be excited by and the kinds of plays that I'd be excited by, and actually Sarah Franklin at the Royal Exchange has the same instincts – I've found myself being paired with writers or with plays, that ask for a little bit more creation. So for example, just plays which would like have stage directions that were impossible. And so you're like, "great!" Instantly there's an ask here of how we do this? Cordelia Lin's play *Lela & Co*, which was the first I directed at the Royal Court... although Cordelia has an incredibly clear sense of what her text is, and what her play is, it was a play that felt like it was asking for an act of invention, about the way that the audience were taken through that show that wasn't outlined on the page. And I think came to terms with that impulse, and I guess

I also learned a little bit that I work badly with writers when I'm trying to follow their impulse completely but end up trying to steer or steal the limelight or whatever. Whereas you know, sometimes I think you can have a really happy, really fizzy collaboration like that.

I then started writing... I think, Simon, the first time I told you I'd written play – actually, I was doing a job that was nothing to do with theatre. I just needed to pay my rent – and I was working for three months, doing customer service training workshops for VW commercial vehicles. And I stayed in identical Premier Inn rooms all over the north of England and Northern Ireland for months and months, going round to all these van centres and trying to teach people to communicate with their customers. And it was soul destroying. It was horrible. And I would come home every night, and wake up in the middle of the night and write plays.

I wrote a play which still hasn't gone on anywhere, partly because every time I spoke to people about it, I would say that I didn't really know how to finish it, or what it is anymore. But I distinctly remember emailing you and a couple of other people – probably drunk. Probably in the middle of the night – saying that I'd written a play. With real terror, actually. Particularly as a director who works with new writing, it was scary to put something in front of someone. Almost saying "so if it is rubbish, please don't stop me from being a director!"

SS Did we talk about that play? Did we meet and talk about that play?

JC Yes.

SS And it's really beautiful. I remember being surprised that it was quite a romantic play, in my memory.

JC Yes. Yes.

SS It is a really tender play. And beautifully written. I remember the clarity and nuance of that writing. I'd forgotten. I should have led the introduction with that!

JC And if anyone wants the script!

SS Yes! It's ripe or production! It's a 2-hander isn't it?

JC It's a 4-hander. Questionable as to whether the fourth character is currently earning her place in the script.

SS But *Nanjing* didn't start in the throes of Premier Inn misery?

JC No, no. *Nanjing* started the year that I was living in Berlin. I was reading a lot and had this quite nice routine, because I was unemployed apart from being a live-out au pair for German families.

So I was reading obsessively. And once I fell down an internet click hole and started learning specifically about the Rape of Nanking. And it was one of those things that just spirals and spirals and spirals. It became this obsessive research project. And my brain instantly wanted to turn it into a play because that's the only thing I know how to do. And also, as I was saying to someone earlier, the point at which I knew I had to make a play out of it was when I understood that it was either that or corner people in the pub about it forever. And I thought, surely making a play is the more efficient

way, rather than constantly asking people "have you heard about this thing? It is called the Rape of Nanking" And everyone else is saying "Jude, please, it's a birthday party!" So I thought, maybe I'll at least give people some degree of choice over whether they want to listen to the material.

But I assumed I would have to get an actual playwright to write it. And I think, probably fortunately for me, at that time there were very few British Chinese or at least East Asian heritage playwrights. Which was lucky for me, because I think if those people had more prominence, or if I'd had a wider network, I would probably would have asked someone else to write it for me out of sheer terror, and then I probably would have been really annoyed that they hadn't had the writerly skill to write exactly what was in my brain.

So I started writing it. And similar to those experiences in the Premier Inns, I started waking up in the middle of the night and writing bits of it. I also distilled sections of it, just as a shorter way of trying to explain to people where I was coming from, and where the history had come from, and how it all fits together. And then through a little bit of funding and development, and some really brilliant people working on the material with me – giving me a kick up the ass to do it myself – I got to a point where I wrote it.

I think another turning point was when the play started to feel like an essay, and I decided to go with that, because I didn't understand at that point how else to tell the story. And then the second thing was, I think I'd figured out quite quickly that if I was going to write it in the way I was writing it, I had to perform it myself. Literally because I was writing "hello, I'm Jude. I'm from these places, and I think these things". But it made me think about workshop facilitation, which is something I had done from right at the beginning of my career, I'd worked a lot – particularly with young people, and with groups who, in various ways, were marginalised or vulnerable. So I realised that I wasn't an actor. And I wasn't really a writer. But one thing I was and am quite good at doing is figuring out how to structure an hour in the company of quite a large group of complete strangers, that will take them on a journey from A to B to C to D, and will give space for them to be themselves within that, but ultimately will take a bit of responsibility for the curation of that time. So I wrote the play really on those terms. What I wanted to do is figure out a way to take an audience on the journey that I had experienced.

I think that is why the play has quite a lot of prologues. I needed to explain who I was. And only then to then go bang, okay, it's 2011, you're sitting at your laptop, and you click on this Wikipedia article called "The Rape of Nanking". And you receive all of that information, which previously you had no knowledge of. So I tried to take people through the stages I went through, from shock to outrage and embarrassment at not knowing about these things, and the scramble for more information, and alighting on particular stories within it that either resonated with the world that I was living in, or felt particularly shocking even on top of the information that I had discovered. And also, asking really big questions about how this recalibrates the world for someone who, I suppose quite lazily had also thought of themselves as a pacifist. I found this information really challenged a lot of those beliefs.

We wrote an early version of the play in summer 2016. And after that Brexit happened, and Trump happened, and having written this creed of militant pacifism which said "you can do anything. I will never ever hurt you" By that winter, I was thinking "do we go out and punch fascists...?" So was everything in the play wrong?

And it's been very strange to keep coming back to it. It's been very weird, actually. We made what we thought of as the first full version of it, in 2018 at the Globe, and particularly with the hiatus of the last year, trying to hold it as a living document for play, without it feeling disconnected from itself while the world continues to change in this incredibly rapid and complex way has been exciting but really, really exhausting and hard.

SS I want to ask you about that. I want to go back to what you dismissed as the prologues. Because the piece starts with something I wouldn't describe necessarily as prologues. And I don't want to do spoilers for people who I hope will be able in some way to watch the performance of *Nanjing* as part of the Stückemarkt.

But you root the discovery of this atrocity from history in your own exploration of your own ancestry, which is something that I find much more beautiful than just a prologue. And it made me wonder, how did the discovery of *Nanjing* make you reappraise your heritage from the Isle of Man for example? Or your heritage from China? There's the beautiful joke... again I won't do spoilers but you ask, are you Malaysian? Or are you Chinese? People coming to the show can... or watching the show... and hopefully coming to the show in the future because you're gonna be doing this for the next 50 years, right Jude?! This is gonna be like *Seawall*. You're just gonna keep doing it.

JC It would get very depressing because there's one point where I talk about my age and having to constantly change that would be really stressful!

SS But what came first, your consideration of your heritage or your discovery of that atrocity?

JC I think I'm someone who's always been a bit curious about their families. My family have always been quite remote...

I grew up with both my parents in the same house so it's not like I didn't have an access to history, but my Manx and English grandparents basically lived on the Isle of Man for as long as I can remember.

SS The Isle of Man, for people who live in Germany and don't know, is an island in the North Sea between the coast of England and the East of Ireland.

JC Frequently confused with the Isle of Wight but very, very different geographically and in every other way.

So they were over the sea. And we would maybe see them once a year if that, and then my mom's parents lived in Malaysia for my entire life. So I saw them probably, over five distinct periods ever. I also don't speak any form of Chinese. It was incredibly complicated as to which forms of Chinese my mum could have taught us and that meant that she didn't teach us any. So my only way of talking to them, given what international phone charges used to be, was basically through my mum, on the very few occasions that we were all in the same country as each other.

So I didn't get very much information. This is something that's in the play. My mum never spoke to me about stuff around *Nanjing* and the Japanese occupation of Penang, specifically because her parents didn't speak to her about it.

When it comes to family history, in contrast to my Mama and Gonggong, my grandpa on the Isle of Man was a brilliant storyteller. Incredibly chatty, with really, really good tales. And I think I was probably a bit churlish about it as a kid, partly because he definitely was one of those people where you're like, Okay, so tell us about the ancestors. And he's like "Okay, so, in 1605..."

It's that and also the complexity of who's related to who, and I think I just went "whatever". And it was only, you know, towards the time he died, a couple of years after I started writing my first version of the play, that I remember this sudden moment of wanting to run over to the Isle of Man with a tape recorder and get all of those stories out of his brain. But definitely my desperation to learn more specifically about Penang and about that period of history grew hugely after I started researching the subject.

I didn't get the chance to have that conversation with my Mama and Gonggong. I think there was a very brief window when it could have happened but they actually died quite soon after I came back from Germany. And I think also, if they wanted to talk about it, they would have done. It was strange because I've been trying to piece that story together through strangers, because as soon as I found out it was too late to get it from my own family. But I think that's okay. I think it would have given me a very different insight into who they were, but it sounds like it's something that they didn't want to give.

SS One of the things I really love about the piece, maybe comes from that impossibility. Because, for me, what makes it resonate in a very broad political way and makes it feel as though it's been about the last 10 years, is that the question at the heart of it seems to be: "who the fuck am I? If that's true, then who the fuck am I?" And that felt like the question a lot of people were asking after the Brexit vote in the UK: "who are we?" And even after the election of Trump, even though that was in the US, that question seemed to resonate throughout the world. The question of the last year, I guess, is maybe a slightly different question, which might be: "how do we survive this?" Or, you know, it feels in some ways like the pandemic has allowed us to be more meditative and more collaborative, and we've gone back to our communities, as you say. Gone back to Salford.

Has that percolated through into the draft that you're going to be working in the Stückemarkt? Or... have you changed the text? Is the simple version of the question...

JC In answer to the first part of your question. Yes. When we did a version of play at The Yard... people were asking me what it was about. And I kept saying it's about pacifism. And it's about the Rape of Nanking, and all these things. And on the last night that we performed it, this woman came up to me and she was like "hi, I'm here with my daughter who saw the show two days ago and has brought me back to watch it today. Because she's mixed race and she's never seen anyone make work talking about being of multiple heritage before". And this poor young woman was like stood in the corner being like, "Mum, stop talking to the woman who made the play. It's awkward" But I suddenly went, "oh, yes, it's a play about being mixed race" And

Elayce, who directs the show, who I'd asked to make it with me for many, many reasons – I hadn't really thought about it before but instantly it made sense that one of the ways in which we had connected over the many years we'd worked together prior to this – was being people who slightly had a foot in and a foot out of this country. Out of the idea of white Britishness.

So I think you're right. The conversation this year has shifted on a national level. But I think one of the things the play helped me to unlock about my own life, and a lot of the connections that I was making was: there's something about a mixed-race kids superpower at play here. Where those of us who have constantly had to figure out all the different bits of ourselves are maybe better placed than other people to weather the current constant uncertainty about suddenly discovering that we're not who we thought we were. Suddenly discovering that things that we've always thought about the world have actually always been incredibly damaging and problematic in relation to other people. Or discovering the heritages we've held up as being noble are actually dripping in blood. All of these different issues that people feel like they're getting blindsided by more than ever today, there was sort of something about going, "oh, I've done versions of this already. I've done feeling confused and not knowing quite what to believe". Or different sides of my family think really different things from each other and there are no absolutes. Of course I'm not saying this is exclusive to people of mixed race, or that it's the rule for everyone who's of mixed heritage.

And so I think in terms of how the play lands today, there's a very, very specific thing about it, where part of its mission statement was always to change the understanding that British people had of modern China. Because my assessment, which has been borne out from performing the play again and again and again, is that it's not just that I was really stupid as a 24 year old, most people I've spoken to, including British Chinese people who were raised in Britain don't know about the Rape of Nanking, or know very little about it. I think it's a generational thing. I think an older generation will tend to know *something*. But I've spoken to a surprisingly high proportion of people who literally had no idea. So, for a while, it became about accepting that in this country, everyone's baseline opinion of China is of it as a baddy. As victors and dominators. But to say to people that within living memory, within recent history this also happened in China. That felt like quite a revelatory thing to do. And in terms of an anti-racism discussion, it felt like a really vital thing to do. Coronavirus, has changed that massively, it's made that mission feel very complex. The current things that are being done by the Chinese government within their own borders, also make that feel incredibly complex. And so I think that rewriting the play now, the thing I've become really keenly aware of is that – particularly because it is happening in the digital realm – we need to make a specific version of the show, which is still the theatre production, but made in the knowledge that there is no audience but a camera, and that suddenly feels like talking to an international audience. But more than ever, I need to have an inner conversation. It links, actually, to Ta-Nia's play *Dreams in Blk Major*, in that I kind of need to have a different conversation with mainland Chinese people, with British Chinese people, and with anyone who is not remotely Chinese in this particular moment in history in relation to the events of this play. And in trying to figure out how we hold that conversation and how we have it, what we've landed on – in relation to that question of "who are we?" – is trying to offer some kind of... I can only speak from my own experience, but I think maybe,

we'll never quite know who we are, and I think it's okay to want to keep discovering and being surprised, and sometimes horrified and sometimes overjoyed by discovering new facets of ourselves. And that might mean, my own life history, the country of my ancestors, it might also just mean a resonance that I have with somebody else whose life looks nothing like mine. I think there's something about accepting it's okay to be multifaceted. And that there is a joy in the possibilities for connection that that opens up between all of us. I think this counterbalances one of the things that is maybe happening today, which is that we're discovering more and more ways in which we're all so horrific to each other, and it makes it hard think we can coexist on the same planet.

SS I think there's something really beautiful and profound about that. And the idea that maybe there is no unifying identity. And if we hold on to these notions that we do have a concrete, objective, Newtonian self, eventually, we're just gonna discover something that contradicts that. And I think that's what your play does really beautifully.

Are you going to write some more? Are you still writing? Are you writing something new? Or is that an old-fashioned question...

JC I'm writing quite a lot of things. And I'm excited by the formal possibilities that were opened up by not really writing a "proper" play, and then lots of people liking it. So quite recently, I got a small commission from Chinese Arts Now, who are amazing! And they created a festival called Stay Connected, where they gave a chunk of money to all the artists they had worked with recently and said make whatever you want, that stays connected to the rest of the community. And so some people have done talks and presentations of work. And I – in one of those moments where I thought I'd just say it and figure it out later – said "I think I want to make a manual about how to grieve"... because I feel like that's a quite useful thing right now! So I did that.

And it was quite a small commission so it wasn't intended to take up a lot of time, and I knew that if I over thought it, it would be impossible. So I just spent a bit of time thinking about some things that I would like to say about the process of grieving that I think might be helpful to other people. And in its entirety, it is a series of photographs of post it notes that I wrote things on and stuck in a notebook. And that's it. And I'm like, I don't need it to be anything else. It's not a pitch for a Broadway show. So it's been quite liberating in that sense to have made that, to have written that, and that it is a completed thing. And now I'll write some other things.

Also, a year in which it's not physically possible to direct anything is secretly quite nice. It helps I think. When the majority of the work people pay me to do, which then allows me to live my life in a capitalist society, is still under the banner of directing, and increasingly directing in midscale, subsidised theatres – directing a particular kind of work for a particular audience, within quite a constrained process – not being able to do that coupled with the act of writing, I think I've found to be liberating. And I think also, because my nature is to be quite collaborative it has opened up so much lovely space to work with other artists. To co-write or write in conversation with other people.

SS I think you write with great grace and great humanity and great poise. It's a real privilege to have watched *Nanjing* and I can't wait to see it live in a theoretical

future that I'm sure will definitely happen. And I hope you have a great time with the version for the Stückemarkt. Jude Christian, thank you very, very much indeed.

JC Cheers my love. It's been very nice to see you.

SERIES OUTRO

SS You've been listening to a special episode of the Royal Court Theatre's Playwright's Podcast in association with the Stückemarkt, 2020/21 at the Berliner Theatertreffen with me Simon Stephens. It was produced by Emily Legg and Anoushka Warden for the Royal Court. All 5 of the pieces talked about on this series – the 5 shows selected by the jurors of this years Stückemarkt – are available online at the Theatertreffen website from the 18 May 2021. There is a link for the website on the show notes. The music for this series was by, and given with the permission of, the brilliant Darrick.