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Playwright's Podcast Season 5 – Sam Max 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.

The summaries on US new play database New Play Exchange, of the four plays by New York based writer Sam Max – each written over the last five years – return to a curious description. Their reimagining of Russian folk tale *Pidor and the Wolf*, hormone fuelled musical piece *Twin Size Beds*, apocalyptic break up play *Driftwood*, and juror's selection for the 2020/21 Stückemarkt, *Coop*, are all described as dark comedies.

I understand that such databases are dependent on simplification, and that Sam Max is another artist in this year's selection that is new to me, but to describe *Coop*, their poetic, haunting exploration of the yearning of a teenage girl in a nightmare of familial imprisonment as a dark comedy seems to me to miss its force. It does have at least three jokes that made me laugh out loud when I read it. But it is so much darker and stranger than the generic description implies.

Sam Max was born in Pennsylvania and graduated from the theatre department of the University of Evansville in Indiana. Since moving to New York they have won the Robert Chesley/Victor Bumbalo Playwriting Award, received an Honourable Mention for the Relentless Award, and were named a member of the Young & Hungry List, tracking "Hollywood's Top 100 New Writers". Sam's work has been presented at Under the Radar Festival, National Sawdust and by the Museum of Sex at the celebrated Joe's Pub. They have been a resident artist at The Public Theatre, and have received

awards from the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

Coop, on one level is the story of Avery. A girl who lives on a farm, finds herself trapped in ritualised acts enacted by her parents and isolated from the outside world. Her resistance to this isolation and entrapment result in a murderous pact that echoes across the rural farmland that Max imagines their drama to play out in. But that synopsis does the play slight service. It is a play that blurs realities between a rural economic objectivity and the imaginative terrain of Avery's mind. It is set on a farmland where no farm life seems to survive. It is a story that plays out on a tarnished landscape of prayer and ritual, in which the family survive entirely on a diet of eggs. It is a play of blood and violence and stillness, defined by dream images, and in which the dead lose contact with us as though we are speaking to them on an unrealizable phone signal. It reads as though Harmony Korine had staged Beckett's *Endgame* on the landscape of Terrence Malick's *Badlands*.

I loved its expiration of language. It is one of several pieces this Stückemarkt that seem to stage characters desperate to find the right word for their experience.

Sam Max is in the early years of their working life but judging from the level of interest their work has provoked and from the depth and clarity of imagination that defines *Coop*, they are one of those writers whose work over the coming decade has the potential to allow us to reimagine ourselves as we come out of the pandemic.

Sam Max welcome to the Royal Court Playwright's Podcast and welcome to the Stückemarkt.

SM Thank you. That's so sweet. That's the best part of this podcast.

SS I don't think it is! It's always daunting speaking to people who I've not met before, or who's work I don't know, but I so loved reading your play and I hope I managed to do you some kind of service.

SM Yeah! I love the Harmony Korine reference.

SS Oh, I was really nervous about putting that in. Harmony Korine is really complex because I'm not a fan of the films of Larry Clark, but Harmony Korine I think is a poet. An absolutely extraordinary artist. And I was really put in mind of those films when I was reading your play.

I always start these conversations with the same question which is: when did you first go to the theatre?

SM Yes, I know this section of the podcast because I'm a fan. Everyone always seems to have these very lucid first moments, and I think that I *don't*. The earliest memories I have are of a VHS of the show *Riverdance* that I watched religiously every night. If you don't know *Riverdance*, it's Irish step dancing where the arms are glued to the side and everyone's in a line of fast patterns and colours. And that was the coolest thing!

SS An amazing, balletic dancing. That step dancing is extraordinary, right?

SM I guess so. It seems really athletic. It was on the TV in the living room constantly. And I feel like if that wasn't an indicator of my homosexuality at the age of five, I don't know what was. And I was trying to recreate the choreography on my friends in the playground.

So there was that and I grew up in Pittsburgh, and there's not really that much of a... There *is* a culture there and theatre *is* being made, but I was taken to the local universities and colleges to see the experimental work that the students were making. One of the first things I saw was this experimental dance interpretation of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and that involved a lot of rolling on the floor, and the costumes clicking on the ground, and the audience being in the dark. And I think my dad wanted to take me out because he thought it was gonna be too scary for me but I was like "I'm staying! This is the coolest thing I've ever seen!"

SS Often when I ask that question to people, however accidentally or tangentially, their answers do reveal something of their future interests. And I really love the idea that there was a future interest of yours there, that might explore some kind of synthesis between an experimental exploration of *Metamorphosis* and *Riverdance*.

SM In a way that's my artistic statement. I don't need to go any further. Everything is a cross pollination of those two and comes back to that intersection, I will say with earnest!

SS What was Pittsburgh like?

SM It was a difficult place to grow up socially for me. On many levels it was torturous, I guess. At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, it was a pretty desolate area to grow up in, and not desolate in terms of people, but culturally a little bit.

SS Because I assume that you were probably born in like 2016 or something... everybody seems so fucking young to me!

SM I was born in 2017 actually.

SS But were these the first years of this century that you were growing up in Pittsburgh? Or the 90s?

SM I was born in 1995. I guess that's an interesting thing because I feel like one way in which I differ from my peers who are my age is that... Well, millennials are said to have known the world before and after the internet. And I really know that distinction because I wasn't allowed internet in my house until I went to college really, or the later years of high school, which was unusual for people my age and I think is one of the reasons I had such a deep, overwhelming sense of imagination. Because I was in a situation in which I was hyper aware of the fact that I wasn't able to communicate with my peers in the way that they were communicating with each other. Or in the way that I sensed they were communicating with each other, which was that they were in contact constantly and meeting up at the mall and that wasn't really part of the social fabric of my youth.

SS It's really fascinating. That idea of being slightly out of step with your peers in terms of social technology and internet technology.

SM Yeah. So when I went to college I got a smartphone and it felt like a second puberty in a way. For people who grew up with cell phones it is just a piece of life, but I went to school and was learning about texting, and texting etiquette, and it became really traumatic for me. Coming late to the game.

SS That's a kind of fascinating, complex trauma. I'm suddenly put in mind of... Lou Reed and John Cale made an album in 1990 about Andy Warhol, and it's called *Songs for Drella*. It's about the whole life of Andy Warhol and the first song is called *Small Town* and is about Pittsburgh, right? Because Warhol came from Pittsburgh. And the last couplet on the song is "there's only one good thing about a small town/You hate it, and you know you're gonna leave" I don't know if you know that song?

SM I don't know the song, but I relate to the sentiment.

SS I related to that growing up in Stockport, I just thought I had to get out of there. And that really drove me to create. Did you feel that need to get out as a teenager?

SM Yes, and I think I knew that before I was a teenager. I think it was really apparent to me when I was very young for a variety of reasons. I think the household I grew up in also wasn't the most comfortable place on earth. And there were power dynamics in the household that were seared into my emotional terrain. Some of my earliest memories are knowing that I wanted to leave and pursue theatre and performance.

SS Who was it that took you to the experimental theatre? Was it your dad who used to take you to see that stuff? Was theatre a thing in your family?

SM I think it was my mom's influence, really. My dad is very much not an artist but my mom is a closeted one, in a way. She is a businesswoman – she runs a hospital – so I, from a very young age, was seeing this woman who's extremely powerful and has a board and a staff and is doing really important work with children and newborns. So I was always watching this woman, and she was also drying at the kitchen table as well.

We had this box of playdough that you put in the oven and baked into solid things, that she would bring out and we would sculpt food out of it. So that was her influence, and she has always been extremely encouraging of my artistic nature, and still is.

SS Was it always theatre you were you interested in? I know you're a musician as well. And you've worked as a set designer as well. Am I right?

SM So I went to acting school in Indiana – a conservatory programme. And I was doing Shakespeare there for four years. And I tell people that my experience of it was that I specialised in characters who look like they just came in from working in the field. So that was my specialty. Farmhands. Shepherds. In Chekhov plays, the characters that are constantly on the brink of committing suicide. And some of those are fun roles but I was also feeling extremely stifled. And I was feeling more and more that I didn't want to be someone who was so interpretive. I felt liberated in a lot of the

acting education but I realised halfway through that I wanted to be a generative artist. Be the person who's making the worlds.

SS So what did you do with that impulse?

SM I think I went to the head of my department and said that I didn't want to be in plays anymore... and he was unhappy with me. And there is something that you can do at the University of Evansville, which is that in the last year of college there are two students who are chosen to direct major productions in the studio theatre. So you put together an application of plays and production concepts – it's this arduous process – and you turn it in. But maybe it's not arduous for some people, but for me it took up two and a half weeks of my life because I really wanted it. And then I ended up landing on a production concept for Sarah Ruhl's adaptation of *Orlando*, which is about this figure who begins their life as a man and then goes through many, many centuries and ends their life in the 1920s as a woman. It's unbelievable material and I felt lucky to get to work on that.

So then I left school but didn't have the impulse to be a playwright. I thought maybe I'd be a director. And then in the week after leaving university I was killing time at my mom's house before going to a job teaching abroad, and that was when I wrote my first play which is called *Pidor and the Wolf*. There were many things I had been thinking about for many months and the space of being post-graduation, and not really knowing what I was doing, allowed me to create this thing that, when I look at it feels extremely unwieldy, feels extremely disobedient to the kind of play structures we were taught in school. I'm really protective of that script.

Then when I eventually moved to the city, I did a workshop with seven actors where I think I paid them each \$8 to work on the script for a week. And then there was an agency calling a month later. Which was terrifying.

SM That's an extraordinarily accelerated process of writing a play in a week and then getting agents chasing after a month. But can we slow it down just a little bit, because I would love to hear your thoughts on Indiana and what it was like to be there? I've never been to Indiana, but am I right in thinking that some of its landscape has percolated in some way into *Coop*? Or am I confusing Indiana with other places? My geography of the United States is very ignorant.

SM No, no, you're not confusing it. The United States is huge! People in Los Angeles are the same distance from me as people in the depths of Europe.

So yes, in Indiana the landscape is twice as desolate as Pittsburgh. You know, like, I described Pittsburgh as desolate. But, you know, I was in the suburbs. I was in close proximity to Bay City. Evansville is a town and it's in a really red state. It's surrounded by Republicans. So it's an interesting place to go to school to make theatre. It's really evident that my university is the cultural centre, in terms of theatre and performance, of that town. And the subscriber base there is what keeps the ticket sales of the department afloat. I was observing when I got there, which I don't think I would have had the chance to observe in Pittsburgh which is a larger city, but I was observing the ways in which this theatre was a civic centre of the community. The reverberations of what stories we were telling, and why, and the performances people were watching – the echoes of those things were extremely clear and direct in the population.

SS Whoa, that's really remarkable, isn't it? You know, working in New York or working in London, sometimes it can feel that we can shout extremely loudly and it reverberates nowhere outside the theatres that we're in. But to work in a town where you can see the effects on the lives of the town, I think there's something really powerful about that.

SM Yeah, I think so. And I think you're right about New York. This has been my playground for making new work for the past few years before the pandemic, and it is really exciting to be around so much work. And it accelerates the rigour of the artistic exploration, because it is kind of this culture in which there's so much work being made, so everyone is trying to innovate from a really different direction. And the voices that are the clearest are the ones that become heard.

What I don't respond to necessarily is the race against each other it feels like we are in sometimes, which I think reflects capitalism in some way. It's really tiresome and fatiguing, I think. I can make a play about my gender experience, and there are also 80 other plays with trans casts that are happening in the same span of six months, which is an unbelievable thing and really exciting, but it also throws up a question about what anyone has to say anymore in this city...

SS When did you move to New York?

SM I moved here in 2017.

SS New York's a hard city for playwrights. It's a city that celebrates its own theatricality and theatrical history. But, as you say, the competitiveness and the amount of people writing for theatre and making theatres almost feels overwhelming. That island feels a compressed space. Going to New York from Indiana – tell me a little bit about that experience?

SM Well I had a bit of a buffer between the two. I hadn't made the decision to come to New York until a few days before I graduated really. I thought maybe I would move back to Pittsburgh and make theatre there, because it was a place that I had a relationship to and it felt as though, while I was growing up there, that there were enough artists creating where I would have had a community, but I would be able to make work and I think really be able to be heard in that city. But I chose New York because I think I had dreams very young, of being a person who lived in New York and had a really rich community of artists and queer people that I could be friends with. So I felt like I owed it to that smaller version of myself to move there. But between Indiana and Brooklyn, I had this bizarre teaching job that took me to France, and then Romania, and then Indonesia. And it was a real gift to do. And it was with a devised summer camp for international high schoolers, and the teaching cohort are drawn from different disciplines. So I was there representing theatre and performance. And there was a sound designer who was there. There was an architect who was there. So what we're doing in the two weeks prior to these international high schoolers coming to the site, is we're devising the courses that we're going to be leading, which was a profound experience for me and I was able to make a lot of really beautiful connections that I think set me up to exist in the city in a way.

But the jump was extremely hard. My whole first year in New York was just extremely raw. And I was emotionally raw. And I met someone recently that I knew in the first

few weeks I was in the city, and we reconnected, and I just found myself profusely apologising for who I was when I moved here. Because I was so frayed, and was just trying to survive. And when you're just trying to survive there's a lack of emotional depth and emotional intelligence that's available.

SS Understandably, I think.

SM It's hard. I mean, the rhythm of the city is just totally impossible. And to be an artist functioning inside a rhythm that is so go, go, go all the time. It takes a lot...

I mean, I feel like the pandemic has been such a gift because I have remained in the city, but I've been able to be inside myself and have this interior experience of the city, in a way that wouldn't have been afforded to me if the world were just going on as usual.

SS The meditative characteristics that people who've been fortunate with their health during the pandemic have often talked about, right? A time of stillness.

When I moved to London from Edinburgh, the first year was one of the hardest years of my life. Because I'd gone from quite a human sized city in Edinburgh, to this sprawling place. I never saw my friends. I had no money. I was totally broke. And I was just doing jobs to pay rent. Working in bars and working in cafes. Were you doing day jobs as well?

SM That's kind of where the set designer thing came from. I had the skill set, and I wanted to be in as many rooms as possible. That's something I knew, and something also that I learned at school, was that if I could just see when I got to the city the rooms that people were holding, and how they were governing those rooms, and what the working styles were, I could start to carve out the ways in which I really wanted to make theatre and I learned a lot from that experience of being the designer in the room. Watching directors work and being an assistant to directors or designers. But I learned really fast that I'm not really that good at being a designer because I'm too self-involved for the role. I really am interested in story and I'm interested in being the pilot, while being a designer is such a generous thing. It's a meditative career in its own right, and an extremely generous one, and an extremely selfless one. I think the really good designers are people who can discover their voice through yielding to other collaborators. And that is certainly true of a writer/director relationship for example. But I just couldn't really. And then going home and being on Vectorworks and trying to make things, it was just a total nightmare. So I knew I didn't want to do that.

And I had other weird jobs too. I worked in a virtual reality exhibition at Brooklyn Academy of Music, as a technician, where you walk in and put the headset and goggles on, and the experience is you going through the life cycle of a tree. So people would be standing there and the narrative is that you start in the soil, so I had this nozzle that dispersed soil smells into the air and I was meant to wave that under their nose. And then they would grow into a more full bodied tree, and I waved the leaf smell under their nose. And then the end of the narrative is that there's a forest fire and you burn! So I would wave smoke at the end of it. And it was just a really bizarre thing, but I was making money for a few months doing that. And I was scooping ice cream, and then I got really anxious that I would get carpal tunnel – because I'm Jewish and a hypochondriac – so I quit that after four months. I think the reason I had

so *many* days jobs is because I got really frantic that I would hurt myself in some way, so I would move on to the next one. So being a writer is really good because I can sit in my room and just click clack.

SS That's so brilliant. You mentioned earlier that the speed of interest in your work from other people was really surprising to you, can you tell us the story of what happened?

SM Yeah, it was exciting and also put me into a huge personal crisis in a way. That was my first play and I was sitting in the offices of Creative Artists Agency... I've heard you actually speak about this before, especially with young women writers, but it's something that happens with young LGBTQIA+ writers as well, and I think for young artists of colour – there's this real sense of panic in the industry right now that we haven't been operating inclusively, and we haven't been telling the stories that are central to so many cultures for so long – so the way of ameliorating that is to race to invite those artists into the room as quickly as possible. But the issue is that, you know, if you're gonna invite someone to the table, the table has to be set properly for them to come in and experience it. And there's so much work that happens, especially in New York, where you go to see it and it's extremely exciting to see a marginalised voice on that scale. But it's also extremely evident in the production that there hasn't really been deep thought about what it means to set a table for that artist to make their work. And here. And why? And how do we allow that to happen in the future? And so I think this is something that everyone is still figuring out.

But the personal crisis I entered – which I was finally able to find the words for recently with my psychotherapist actually – was that there was an immediate sense of gratification that came after writing my first work which came in the form of getting interest from representatives, which was something I thought I might have achieved at 30 after writing five to seven plays. So there was a conflation that occurred between my career ambition and creative ambition. And for a few years, I was in a place where I was getting attention; I went on two trips to LA with weeks full of meetings with Hollywood people who were interested in me after reading my first play. Such a bizarre experience, and at a stage where I am hardly even calling myself a playwright yet. I don't even know what that means. I don't know what my craft is or my practices are in any way, yet I'm having this experience. And I spend two or three years extremely confused, and traumatised, about what it means to go on making work. I was actually afraid that I might lose everything if I make something else. And only recently have I started to be able to work on another play, because it was a really traumatising season. And I don't want to make it sound like I'm not extremely grateful for those advancements. But it's a really fragile period of an artistic life and of a writing life. And there are certain people who are equipped to support an artist in that time, and I don't think representatives are those people.

SS I don't think you sound ungrateful at all. You sound incredibly clear and lucid. And really brilliant in that analysis. I have stopped using the word "career" as much as I can. I think it's a really poisonous word. And I talk about my "working life" for the job stuff and admin, but "career" carries within it, exactly as you describe, that impulse to continue and get better and you take your eye off the one thing you can change, which is the work. That's the one thing you've got responsibility for, is the work.

SM And I think what I was realising in my practice was that I felt so out of control over what this idea of a career was, and suddenly I had all these people at the table with me, that I was trying to wrest back control through the writing experience. I describe the experience as like clenching my hand as I wrote. And I've found that that makes these extremely messy drafts that are totally unclear and I've no idea what I'm working on really, because I'm just trying to exert control over my personal life through the experience of writing, which should ideally be extremely gentle and slow and open.

SS Let's talk about the work then. If we can talk about *Coop* and the process of making *Coop*? What was the starting point for that play?

SM The starting point was an environment. The farm is something that is extremely trite and archetypal in the American drama canon. You know, Sam Shepard is writing all these works that are set in the middle of nowhere, in deserts, on farms. And Eugene O'Neil. There's just a lot of fucking farms.

So I think the American Farm represents this confluence of really interesting themes. It's about the physical body and putting the physical body on the line in order to achieve certain things. And also the farm's relationship to capitalism, which is the source of the food industry, and the difference between the textural qualities of living on a farm, which I've done, and the contemporary pieces of society that consume what that farm creates. So I was really drawn to the location and I knew I had all these past experiences that were extremely confusing and disorienting on farms.

For example, I had volunteered on this Appalachian farm in college for a few weeks. And it was a Catholic farm, and a really perverted idea of a thing to do on my part because I'm Jewish. But I was always doing these things when I was young, and I was reflecting recently on how much I wanted to be able to do these things again. Where I would just sign myself up for things that were the least interesting things possible for myself to spend time doing. So going to volunteer on a Catholic Appalachian farm was one of them. I can't imagine a worse experience... But I thought it was something I would be able to use one day, so I went.

So not only were they Catholic and really wholesome, which is my nightmare, but also there was no technology on the farm. So you get there and your laptop, phones and watches are locked in the car that you arrived in. And it's meant to create this spiritual community where we are all each other have, and it did certainly do that, but you know... my first day we went on this hike and everyone's detoxing on the top of this mountain, and you're holding hands, and someone's reading a Catholic Psalm... and I was like "what have I gotten myself into!" So after that I just released into it. And I was keeping a really intricate journal the whole time, because I was meeting these people who are just like, totally not my crowd, who were really interested in service as a religious idea. And that became really influential to the play. There's that frustration in the play I think, between a personhood and ideology.

SS What do you mean by personhood? That's a word I've not heard before.

SM I think in the play it is to do with a protagonist trying to find a sense of self in a very teenage way. And that includes discovering sexuality. And that includes discovering a relationship to a community that doesn't really exist. It's an abstract

idea, but it's to do with the tension between the unruliness of the experience of puberty and coming into one's own self, versus these large structures that have been in place since biblical times that are meant to tell you how you're supposed to act in the world.

SS It's really beautifully captured in the play I think. So you wrote the journal while you were there on the farm. Were you thinking about writing it as a play? Or were you just there to have the experience? Had you gone with a secret agenda?

SM No, I hadn't gone with any agenda. I had just gone because, like I said, I thought it was gonna be a really interesting experience.

I went to Jewish summer camps my entire upbringing. And I think I became interested really young in what ritual is and means. And the ways in which our lives are rituals, even for people who aren't religious. And so much ritual comprises our basic ways of going about the world. So no, I didn't think I was going to make anything about it. But reflecting on the experience years later, it felt like a really fertile place to draw inspiration from.

SS Was it years? You were there in college. When did you start writing it?

SM I went to the farm my freshman year of college in 2014, and then I started writing Coop in 2018.

SS And with a playwriting geekery interest in that process, did you return to the journals? Did you reread the journals? Or were you drawing from your imagination when you started making the play?

SM I didn't return to the journals because I think I have been finding I have a really fraught relationship to research, and that felt like a form of that. To go back and look at the word. I have such a better time of making plays when I'm drawing from an abstract place of memory, and I'm pulling up in a very pure way what comes through the sieve of my emotional memory of that experience. I think it leads to much more interesting explorations in the text.

I'm really also a curious person and an academic person. So when you put an essay or something in front of me, like my journals which are these kinds of essays in a way, I get really buckled to them and feel bogged down by all this external stimuli. It makes the act of writing the play feel really impossible because it's already difficult enough for me to have a single clear thought, especially nowadays. If I'm going into the process inundating myself with more and more information it just feels like I'm adding obstacles that don't need to be there.

SS So what did you do? What was the process of the actual writing of the play?

SM Well, it's interesting Simon because I've heard you speak about your process in multiple contexts and it's extremely lucid.

SS Only because I've done it a lot. It's just practise. And it stops actually being true. It's no longer a true description of the process. It's just a memory of the last time you answered that question.

SM I have not arrived at a process that has brought me reliable results at all. And I actually think that part of the beauty of it is all of the things that are wasted. I mean, for every play that comes to fruition for me, there is 100 times that material that's just sitting around. Because I'm just playing. It feels like I'm in a sandbox really. I'm just playing and building something over here and then finding that it doesn't really work.

But the way you describe your process, I think was like: you have ideation. And then you have a mulling period, then a research period. And then it's finally time to write the plan. Then you write your dialogue and it is really, really fast. I hope you don't think I'm stalking you by the way, I just have a memory of how people describe their processes!

I'm writing dialogue from the very beginning. And I'm doing what I call "sprints". Which are me sitting down and just writing it in the way that it's coming out. And they get to like page 60 or so, and inevitably I've given myself conventions that aren't sustainable for an entire play. Like, stupid things that I've put on that I think are clever, or that people will respond to, or that I've never seen on stage before. But inevitably, those are the things that are holding the play back from actually being a draft. And so I do that over and over and over again, just sprinting with it for 60 pages or so. And then finally, once I'm able to listen to the material that's there, the conventions and the form will arise really purely from what has come through.

And that was very much the process on *Coop*. So I was writing all these scenes between this older male figure and a younger feminine character. And I could tell the feminine figure wasn't exactly a woman. And so I started thinking "Okay, so this is someone who has gender confusion, experiences of gender dysphoria, which I was certainly having. And I can tell that they're speaking to this older man who's very settled in his gendered experience" So I was just allowing a lot of scenes to pass back and forth between these characters. And then I realised that he was a dead person and that she was still living, and that a lot of the scenes had a sexual tilt. And I wasn't really interested in the incest direction, because it's already on a farm... I was like "dear God, we don't need anything else like that"... you know, everyone's making these shows about hillbillies and feeling like they have a lot to say about people who are impoverished... So I knew that that wasn't what I wanted to write. That's why I ended up with that section.

And then I also had a body of material about the young person and the uncle, the older man, and I had a body of material that was just the family talking to each other and the textures of those interactions were all so weird and felt like people play acting. Like people speaking to each other, but they're aware that they're in a play and speaking to each other. So I had that pocket too. And then the sexual nature of the uncle and the main character relationship ended up turning into this, like, delivery boy section where she is kind of engaging with this man who looks exactly like her. And she's asking him to kill her parents, but also then spit in her mouth. So there are these three territories in the play.

But I didn't know how they could coexist together. They seemed too weird tonally to exist side by side. But then I realised if I started cycling through them, putting them side by side, then I have this kind of weird cyclical structure that feels like it's also

representing a bloodletting ritual. And I know that she wants to kill her parents. And it became a really interesting thing that I never would have arrived at if I hadn't just allowed myself to sprint with the material in a bunch of different directions.

SS I love the extent to which the form of the play communicates its central ideas. I think that's really, really beautiful. Forgive my ignorance, what kind of life has the play had in New York?

SM I directed a small independent production of it in a black box, in February 2020. That ran for three weeks on this thing called an Equity Showcase Code, which is a nightmare.

SS What's an Equity Showcase Code?

SM Something that the union set up in America, which I think they've actually gotten rid of now since the pandemic. But the actors' Equity Union has this thing called a showcase code, where you're only allowed to rehearse a certain amount of hours in advance of a production run. It has something to do with the pay scale and protecting the actors and protecting their hours. But I was lucky to find a really generous group of actors who were in my community and who knew my work. And I decided I wanted to direct it because I felt like I had a vision for it.

I don't know if I'm really interested in doing anything like that again, just because I think the distance between the writer and the work is extremely useful. And I think the intervention of a really smart director is really useful to a good production. But it was a lot of fun and a huge growing experience for me, and we ran for three weeks. And then our last weekend of shows, which were sold out, were cancelled because on March 14th all the independent theatres were announcing that they were closing. Well first there was Scott Rudin saying "you can come see our show for \$50! I know it's a pandemic, but you can come see the show for very, very cheap!", which was kind of like a *Mother Courage*... situation with someone trying to get as many people as possible into a theatre at a moment of total uncertainty and darkness! It was actually the independent theatres who were leading the way and saying we need to close. And getting archival photographers and videographers in there. And then it was over...

SS But it's coming to the Stückemarkt, which is really exciting. What form is it going to take? How are you going to recreate or restage it?

SM So I'm actually extremely removed from that process, because of the ways the Germans work, I'm learning. I'm treated like a princess, which I love. And everyone's extremely nice to me, but they're saying "you stay over there, and we'll work on it" So I have no idea what it's gonna look like if I'm honest. There's this director named Charlotte Sprenger, who's really exciting, who's going to be working on it. And the group of actors they've chosen is really attractive, but it'll be a staged reading, and that'll be live streamed.

SS Great. In German or in English?

SM It'll be in German, I am now published with Suhrkamp Theater Verlag. And they have translated my first two plays. And so that translation by Robin Detje will be performed with English subtitles.

SS I really look forward to watching that. And I'm really moved and inspired by the idea of that having gone into this maelstrom of capitalist fascination in the wake of *Pidor and the Wolf*, you said you're coming out of that and starting to be able to make work again?

SM Yes theatre work. I've been working on some screenwriting things because that has felt like the most available medium. And I think that's just a natural thing that the artistic body does, which is responding to the mediums that are available. And I'm realising how much seeing other people's performances is so central to my artistic practice and inspiration. But yes, I've been able to start writing theatre recently.

SS Have you enjoyed doing the television and film work?

SM That's a complicated question. I have enjoyed the process of discovering my artistry inside that form, I will say that. But without being too pessimistic or cynical, I'm having a very deep awakening about the ways in which the systems that I don't like, which underwrite the theatrical production process, are just as if not more evident in the film production process. And capitalism has so much to do with that. I think it's something artists have come up against for centuries and centuries, which is that people who are doing things that feel different from what's been done before, feel extremely scary. And luckily, there are some people I've met who work in that industry and have been forces for supporting work from identities that haven't been represented in storytelling. And for me... I guess I just want to say that I'm not someone who's really interested in identity politics. I identify as a non-binary person, I'm a queer person, but I'm interested in that in so much as it creates a really good emotional story. And I think there's this trap of work that becomes really diluted because the American Theatre and American film industry want the conversation to be so reductive that it ends up presenting something most like a news story about "this is what it's like to be me"

And also, there's this call for a queer person's work, or any marginalised person's work to be extremely autobiographical. For example, I'm not allowed to be a crime writer. I'm not allowed to write a bank heist. Because I'm only meant to speak to my experience, because that hasn't been heard for so long. So that's just something I'm coming up against.

SS You speak about it with profound clarity. Are you enjoying returning to the theatre?

SM I am. It feels like a really extreme act of delusion, because there's no theatre happening right now. But at the same time I say to myself, "when hasn't it been an act of delusion to write a play, so why not?" But I have. It's set in the UK Simon!

SS That's great. Have you spent time in the UK or is it an imaginary UK?

SM No, I studied in England in a town called Grantham for a semester.

SS Margaret Thatcher's town that. You're like a mix between Andy Warhol and Margaret Thatcher!

SM That's what everyone says about me!

SS What the hell were you doing in Grantham?!

SM My American University in Indiana has this satellite school that is a manor – which they acquired in the early 70s – it’s called Harlaxton Manor. So the theatre students go there for a semester. They call it a “grow up” semester... Because you go abroad and somehow drinking a lot and being inside this Manor is meant to make you grow up in a way. And I’m studying with, you know, English professors who are teaching Shakespeare and I’m also studying violent acts of terrorism because that’s just the nature of a liberal arts education, I guess. But we were all like “oh my God, a four or three day learning week! That’s so exciting! The British school system is so cool!” And we had these six day travel excursions on the weekends. But while everyone was going off to fancy places I was going into London and seeing experimental theatre at the Barbican, and at the Royal Court, actually.

SS Ah, that’s lovely that you’re on our podcast then! Bringing you back to your spiritual home!

Is it too early to say what you’re writing about that’s set in the UK? Or why you’re writing about the UK? What is it about the UK that’s captured your imagination?

SM I have been trying to work on a play about the far right for a year and a half or two years. I remember the conversation where I first brought up the idea to one of my friends, and I just haven’t been able to write it ever since. And I actually realised that by looking at a country that’s not my own, it’s allowing me to release into the conversation in a way. So it’s also a period piece. So it’s set in the 80s in the UK, and that that has allowed me to have enough abstract distance from the current conversation in America.

I discovered this historical figure called Nicky Crane, who was one of the most brutal street fighters in the British far right. And he was this tall, kind of Paul Bunyan guy. He was totally hairless. He was a skinhead. And he was also living a double life as a gay man. And he came out really publicly on Channel Four in this documentary called *Out*, which was going to show Nicky Crane having come to terms with his sexuality, apologising on television. And so there’s like a 30 second part of the interview that’s actually still online. So he came out and got totally rejected by the far right, and lost contact with everyone he knew in that community. He got HIV in 1992 and died of AIDS related complications in 1993. So I thought this has all these echoes of a Greek tragedy, because you’re living with this sense of reversal for an entire life. And then there’s a moment of recognition. And then there’s the downfall that follows afterward. And I have real questions about what it means to apologise and to change your ways, and also what cancellation means in contemporary culture, and how the conversation around identity and past harm might actually prevent us from moving forward as a society.

SS It’s so funny, because you said you may be self-conscious about the lucidity or clarity with which you can talk about your process, but I’ve rarely met a writer who speaks with such a level of intelligence and thoughtfulness and communicates that thought with such clarity. It’s a real honour to speak with you Sam. And not only do you have that clarity, lucidity and intelligence of thought, but you can do it while my family is shouting to one another in the background!

It makes me very sad that we’re not in the Royal Court studio, and then we could just go and hang out in the Royal Court bar or go and watch a play at the Royal Court.

And then just when my family finally stopped shouting, the whole world seemed to begin drilling!

So thank you for your patience, in the face of the noise that I brought. And thank you much more for the beauty of your play and the dark forces that underpin it, and the clarity and intelligence with which you've talked about your work. Sam Max thank you very, very much indeed.

SM Thank you.

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 year's 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.

