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Playwright's Podcast Season 5 – Laurence Dauphinais 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.

It is indicative of my ignorance that I knew nothing of the work of Quebecoise musician, artist, director, actor and writer Laurence Dauphinais until starting work on this conversation. An ignorance only underlined by the range and success of her work not only in Montreal, where she lives and works, but throughout the world.

Her body of work is defined by its diversity. She was a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada's acting programme and has acted with success on television, in film and on stage alike. She toured solo work internationally. Her shows *iShow* and *Siri* travelling throughout Europe and South America.

She has written and directed *Lumens:Game*, a generative music and video piece created by Video Phase, has made soulful new electronic music with the Montreal collective Darrick, and is in the process of making her latest co-creation with Maxime Carbonneau, *In the Cloud*.

Her beautiful piece of documentary drama *Aalaapi*, which has been chosen for the 2020/21 Stückemarkt, was her debut as solo director. It premiered at the Centre du Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui (CTDA) in Montréal where it won the 2020 Playwright's Prize.

Aalaapi depicts a marginalised group that is hardly ever given a voice in contemporary drama: the Inuit. Dauphinais works in collaboration with radio director Marie-

Laurence Rancourt and the two performers Nancy Saunders and Ulivia Uviluk to create a piece that synthesises recorded testimony, hyper naturalistic drama and elegant, poised projection art. It is a haunting study of the humanness and persistence of Inuit culture as it spans the range of Canada and Quebec from the urban energy of Montreal to the coldest, most battered parts of isolation within the Arctic Circle.

Its quiet poetry, imagery and sound felt defined by its humanness. Its cascade of text crystallises the complexities of a multilingual culture and the yearning and impossibility of ever finding the right word. In its study of two performers contained within an isolated home I was surprised to see images of the lockdowns of the last year resonating. In its meteorological brutality it evoked images of climate instability that linger round the edges of so much of our imagination. But in its wit and honesty, restraint and humanity it is built with as much compassion for the community it documents as it reaches out into metaphors that resonate throughout the world.

Laurence Dauphinais, welcome to the Royal Court Playwright's Podcast, and welcome to the Stückemarkt.

LD Oh, yeah! I feel great!

SS What a real, real pleasure to meet you!

LD Same here, Simon!

SS Me and producer Anoushka, who's very famous on the Royal Court Playwright's Podcast, had a big chat this morning about how into your music we are. And believe me, if she compliments your clothing, as she does for the video for *Across the Universe*... If you get a compliment about your clothes from Anoushka, you're killing it!

LD That's right! Okay! Yes!

That's good. Oh, man, I don't feel good about my clothes every day, but today's a special day.

SS I always start these conversations, when I'm doing them just for the Royal Court, with the same question; and I've decided to keep that question for these conversations with Stückemarkt, which is: when was the first time that you went to the theatre?

LD Wow. Oh my god. I love that question. Um, first time I went to the theatre. It must have been as a child but it's a little blurry. I was lucky enough to go to the theatre with school.

SS Where did you go to school? Was that in Montreal?

LD Yeah.

SS Were you raised in Montreal?

LD Yeah. Yes, I was raised in Montreal. My mom was trained as an actress and she was an acting coach for young actors. A big theatre fan. So they brought me to the theatre. So the first time... I think it was the *Fourberies de Scapin* by Molière. But I

think I was so young that I just kept kicking the bench in front of me, and there was a very famous director sitting in front and my mom was so embarrassed.

SS I quite like that. Even before you knew it, you were kicking the establishment.

SS That is so good. I never saw it that way but you're a little right.

And then I guess the first real time that I remember was when I saw *Cyrano de Bergerac* in Montreal, directed by Alice Ronfard. It was played by Guy Nadon who was a very important actor here, who taught me later when I was at the National Theatre School. And I was just blown away of course, and you know, we were sitting first row with my parents and it was a defining moment.

It's funny because when I was in theatre school all I could imagine was acting in classics. It's all I wanted to do. I could have acted in Racine plays until I died. But that's not what happened at all.

I think that the only classical play I've ever acted was in English. It was *As You Like It* by Shakespeare. Just after I graduated from theatre school. It was Shakespeare in the Park. So we were travelling from park to park. It's the only time I did it. In French I never acted in any classics, just creation work.

SS Wow!

I've never been to Montreal. I've never been to Quebec. I've been only to Toronto in Canada, which always feels like a kind of strange offshoot of New York in some way.

LD With less stuff!

SS But I'm fascinated, were you raised completely bilingual in both English and French?

LD No, no, no. Not at all.

SS So how did it work for you? Were you raised in French?

LD Yeah, I was completely raised in French. My parents don't speak English.

When I was really young, we'd go to the American East Coast for the holidays. And I'd wake up at the border just to laugh at my parents' English.

SS That's great! Laughing at your parents is always a healthy thing.

LS So no, I was awful at English. I actually had nightmares about English. Because in elementary schools the English teachers speak to you in French when you don't get it. But then when you switch to high school, they don't anymore. You need to get your shit together. So I wasn't really scared of going to high school, I was scared of the English lessons in high school! I didn't know how I would get by. And somehow I never failed. But I really don't understand how that happened. And then eventually, you know, puberty came, and I fell in love with Nick Carter from the Backstreet Boys. And I was really going to marry him. So I had to learn his language.

SS Of course! It was important! I hope he appreciated that!

LD I'm sure he does!

So I started being extremely diligent. Reading all the lyrics and searching in the dictionary and practising. Coming to my high school teacher and asking weird questions about weird song lyrics that meant nothing at all. So that's how it all started.

You know, you were talking about the insular theatre culture that is London, but you know, I feel like Quebec as a whole is an island. It's an island in North America. It's a really insular culture, which has positive aspects but it has some negative ones too. And I felt like English could really be a passport for me to be open to the rest of the world. And I wanted to maybe work in English even. So I started taking dialect lessons. And I got really serious about it. So that's why you can hear me now.

SS It's really fascinating to me. I wish I'd seen being able to see *Aalaapi* live. I wish I'd been able to go to Berlin to watch it live. But even watching the film of it last night. One of the things which I found really haunting, was this multiplicity of different languages, not just English and French, but First Nation languages as well, percolating in there. And I just thought there was something profoundly beautiful about that. It's interesting that that's deep in the mindset of Quebecoise culture from childhood, perhaps.

Did you always want to act?

LD It came early. As I said, my mom was an actress and an acting coach. And I loved school, but I wasn't really happy around my contemporaries. As a child. I wanted to be with adults all the time. So whenever I could, I would go see my mom at work. And that was usually you know, on sets, so I wanted to be a part of it. But when my mom got an offer for me to audition for her new show, she said no. She was working every day with young children that were being bullied because they were acting, and she didn't want that for me. But the network got kind of insulted. They were like "at least talk to your daughter about it" which she did. And of course I was like "yeah! I want to do it!" So that's how it started."

SS Was your mum working on the show as an actor?

LD No, she was working on the show as a coach, and she became my coach because I got the job.

SS You said yes despite your mom resisting you!

LD Yeah...

SS In the UK cinematic, theatrical, televisual history, a lot of people who start off as child actors fall by the wayside, and don't pursue it into adulthood. What was it about acting that you fell in love with? Presumably, there was something about it that really grabbed your imagination and kept you motivated?

LD Oh my god... I mean... I wasn't a very well-adjusted person.

SS They are always the best! Never trust the well-adjusted ones! They're the ones you have to be frightened of!

LD Yeah. And I guess it gave me the sort of alternative life that I really liked. I liked to be surrounded by adults on set. I liked to study characters and learn lines and have

this alternative life. I was a hypersensitive kid. And I saw problems in everything. And I think that the fact that I was studying humanity, and studying human beings made me feel better. I was a really empathetic child. So it was a natural thing for me.

But there was something that kept me in it over time, because I have found a lot of frustrations with acting, and acting for TV and film as well. I felt that it was limiting. Very often I experienced anti-intellectual little societies. Sometimes I would bring a book on set and people would make fun of me, as if I wanted to show off that I read. Also, I would have to do things that I didn't really believe in, or say lines that I didn't think were good. And there we were rewriting everything with the directors the morning of. And trying also to fit the mould body wise. For women, it's extremely stressful. You always see the same kind of bodies on TV all the time. So as a young actress, you try to fit the mould. So you're always trying to lose weight, always feeling bad about yourself. And I have conversations with actresses today, all the time, about those things. And at some point, I was like, I chose the arts to be freer. But now this is making me a prisoner. And I don't think I really enjoy this. This is not what I want to choose for myself. And what made me go to Theatre School was a desire for depth. I wanted to explore a little more. Dig deeper into the craft. I felt like an imposter, saying, "yeah, I'm an actress", but having had no training at all. So I went but then I discovered creation in school. Slowly. Because for the most part, I had no idea and like I said, I wanted to be an actress and play Racine and all of that. But, slowly, in school, they gave us opportunities to touch creation projects, and do our own thing. And I discovered that that was really what I wanted to do. And it answered everything that I was lacking.

SS It's a really compelling story of somebody trying to find, and then succeeding in finding their agency. What's fascinating is that noun "creation", I've never heard used in that way. But I really love it. I think it's really beautiful, I guess "theatre making", might be what we would say, or "making new work", or "writing new work".

Were you writing at all? Or was it stuff that you were improvising? Or how were you creating that work when you're in an acting school?

LD No, I wasn't writing. Yeah, we say "creation" here. We say "théâtre de création".

SS So that's like "new work".

LD Exactly. Yes.

Before going to the National Theatre School, I went to Concordia University for a couple years, studying theatre and music. And I met this man, Jordan Beecher, who was doing some exploration around artificial intelligence and emotions. And he started involving me. Started plugging me into sensors. We were working with Mitchel Benovoy, who was a student in engineering at McGill University at the time, and we were doing all these experiments, and he wanted to develop an AI device that would be able to read emotion in real time and render what your emotions look like. Almost like a visual weather forecast of emotion.

SS Wow!

LD So basically, my first creation project in school was with Jordan. And we wrote this story, which was a very simple personal story of mine, but I was plugged to the sensors. And I was moving around the room, and there were scrims, and I had to recreate the original emotional state I was in when I first recorded the story, so an image would appear on the scrims. So it was me going around the room and trying to recreate the intensity of the initial emotions. And then the audience could see an image related to that.

SS But this was something you were experiencing internally? You were recapturing the emotion internally and creating images out of your feelings?

LD That's it.

SS That's kind of mind blowing!

LD It was fun. I mean, I was really lucky to meet with Jordan who opened me up to this whole world of AI basically, and what we could do with AI and performance. And that encounter led to other encounters. I met with Aaron G, who's a young artist who also builds robots. Robots who can also read your emotions and will make music based on your emotions. So I guess my first explorations were really, really based on technology. And it's kind of how I started in the world of theatre making. It was through explorations with technology.

SS That's so fascinating.

LD The first show that we toured, that you mentioned, *iShow*, that was a collective piece, and we were exploring the dramaturgy behind social networks. So we were 15 people with our laptops, online, on stage. And we were basically talking to people on Chatroulette on stage, and involving them in different things. And exploring intimacy through virtuality. That was the performance.

And yeah, it worked quite well. It was really strong, I think, to see such a body of people on stage, but behind screens, and the community that was being built with all of these people. For some people it was quite shocking and sad, and for others, it was fascinating. So it depends.

SS What do you think was shocking or sad about it?

LD With technology, I think there are big generational gaps.

SS Sure.

LD For certain people, watching actors behind their screens, and talking to people behind their screens, it felt like we were all very lonely.

Which I don't think is true. Sociologists who study virtual communities say that they are as real as physical communities. People playing video games, in network, are really a true community. And they experience it that way. And they're not necessarily lonely, because they're not with other physical bodies in space. During this pandemic, it's amazing the amount of reflections I've had on that and I think everybody's had on that.

And I always loved the theatre because it was a communal space. And I think that it is super important to keep that alive. To all meet in the same space at the same time,

and to experience this rare thing in front of us. But I'm also really curious to see what we can do with virtual space and the theatre.

SS It's really compelling. It's really, really fascinating. And ties in completely with what we're doing now. Having this conversation with you now, as you're sitting in Montreal, and I'm sitting in London, and we are talking through our screens. Like so many zoom conversations in the past year. The energy is akin to being in the same room with somebody. I must remember that when I worry about my 19-year-old constantly on his Xbox, swearing into his "shouty box", as I call it. He's building his community too. And I love the idea of synthesising that into theatre with live audiences.

LD It's funny, I think more than ever now, we have to rethink community and democracy, including this. And I think the theatre space should be a way more democratic space than it is now. I think if we say "yeah, physical community is important", then we really have to live up to our word, and rethink what that means. Because that gives the theatrical space a responsibility that I think sometimes it doesn't live up to. Of inclusion. Of accessibility. All of those things. The virtual world is, by default, potentially more inclusive. So the physical, theatrical spaces have to learn from it, maybe, or find inspiration there.

SS That's a really galvanising provocation!

But I'm fascinated, before we talk about *Aalaapi* – am I pronouncing that with any proximity to the correct pronunciation?

LD Yes! Completely!

SS Because you have travelled the world with your shows? With *iShow*, didn't you?

LD We toured Europe, and we toured Canada. With *Siri*, which was a show where I was alone on stage with Siri, and we were having this dialogue together. That's a piece that we toured in Rio, in Edinburgh, in Dublin. We went to Trinity College! That was amazing! That was so fun.

SS It sounds glorious!

LD Yes! We had a great time there.

And that was a piece that was about... basically I was born from artificial insemination. So it was a quest to think about my own programming, through my DNA, versus the programming of an AI, of a device. So it was the two of us meeting and having conversations. And, you know, digging into that.

SS That's really fascinating!

I'm interested in the experience of touring a show which is about the virtual space. Touring into a geographical, actual physical space, with a show built on an investigation of a virtual space. What did you learn from taking *Siri* to Dublin? Taking it to Rio? And did you learn a lot as a performer, as an artist, as a creative artist, from touring?

LD I learned so much. I learned that audiences are so different! Like, it's

fascinating, you know, and sometimes we feel that “yeah, what I’m creating can appeal to lots of people” but... unfortunately, we are so tainted by our culture, and by what we know, and what is familiar to us. And that is why innovation is so important, because everybody needs innovation. Everybody needs to get away from familiarity. Because what is familiar is comfortable. And sometimes you see things that are less familiar, and you will want to reject what you’re seeing. And I think that is why arts education is so important. And giving people access to innovation is so important. Because if not, we just recreate the same things over and over again because they feel familiar.

SS Yes! We go into these loops.

LD And of course I am, even though I’m not conscious of it every day, a product of my culture as well. So I create things that are gonna speak to my culture. Like, in Rio, what was interesting, was a political realisation. We were invited by this really cool theatre called Oi Futuro, who are a theatre who are interested in new technologies. But, you know, contemporary theatre in Rio... experimental, contemporary theatre, it’s not really *the thing*, and it’s not the thing people on the street will be attracted to. And in a way, I felt kind of bad while I was there. Here I am, you know, being invited as this cool Canadian artist, with a huge budget, going there for a month, performing four times a week, the rest of the time having fun, and not a lot of people are seeing the piece. And I’m actually talking to a few older, privileged people there. I am not talking to who would be my fellow Brazilians. And I felt a little bad about that.

I think that as artists that are touring we need to ask ourselves those questions. You know, this is costing a lot, is this money being used responsibly? Am I really reaching an audience? Do they care? Or should we do something else? You know, with *Siri*, it was quite fascinating to tour because every time we had to translate the piece, so we had to use another Siri. And we discovered that she had big differences between the cultures as well. Some languages were more censored than others.

English is the most censored, obviously, because the engineers are all Anglophones. Or, mostly. So in French, when we created it, there were lots of things that she was still saying, regarding love, things that we found she wouldn’t say in English, because they were trying not to be sued. For someone falling in love with Siri for instance. Or someone being offended by something Siri said. So that was interesting.

Touring *iShow* was amazing. We toured a lot of national stages in France, and the national stages are such incredible theatres in small towns, created in the 60s when people were screaming “decentralise culture!”. And “we’ll open these incredible theatres in small towns and give access to the people!” And I think that’s great. I don’t have the statistics so I don’t know how well it truly works in reality, but it feels really good to be in those spaces.

SS It’s a really big, interesting conversation in Britain at the moment as we come out of the pandemic, and also since the economic crash of 2008; how we can decentralise theatre and culture in the UK. And open theatres in Stoke or Middlesbrough. Dorset. In towns and cities throughout the UK rather than focusing everything in London.

LD That would be amazing.

When we went to Dublin, to Trinity College, it was so great because the reason why we were able to go there was because there was a co-production between Trinity College theatre, and Accenture, which is a high-tech multinational company. And it was super cool for us. We spent our afternoon at Accenture, speaking to engineers who were actually building assistants like Siri, and discussing the show and discussing our research and they were so interested in all the data we'd accumulated over the years. And then we performed in front of those guys, and in front of the general audience at night, but there was corporate money. And afterwards I questioned "why can't we tour in the UK?" And people were saying there's no money to bring something from elsewhere. The budgets are maybe £1000, and with £1000 there was no way we could do that show. So I quickly realised, unfortunately, that the only place we could go to was London. And that London is a whole different ball game. So I was surprised to see how different it was, and how basically, what Malraux did in France in the 60s of saying "decentralise culture!" had a huge impact. And that wasn't necessarily the case in every country.

SS The impulse to decentralise, both politically, culturally and geographically, might be one of the impulses that underpins the thinking behind *Aalaapi*?

Did you see what I did with that segue?

LD Yes! Great!

SS But I think it is an extraordinary show. And I hope I get to see it in real life.

LD But you saw the poor film version that we did in a really tiny venue?!

SS And I really loved it!

LD Really!

SS I loved the tiny venue!

LD But what I mean is I can't wait for you to see the film version that we're doing for the Stückemarkt in Berlin.

SS Ah well... I can't wait to see that as well! I'll really look forward to that! Could you tell me about how this show started?

LD So this show started from a really naive place... Like maybe everything in a way?

So I wanted to work in the medium of radio. I'm fascinated with sound work but didn't have any experience in it. So I approached Marie-Laurence Rancourt, who has started a company called Magnéto, and *all* they do is sound creation! At the time it was the 150th anniversary of Canada, which was controversial because the First Nations there were like "...what's that?" So we were in the middle of having tonnes of conversations about decolonization. Conversations that had been happening for a while and are extremely important. And I've been seeing a lot of changes, recently, in the arts world because of that, and the general conversations we're having about inclusion and diversity. So there is hope!

But yes, the programme for the 150th anniversary was called New Chapter, by the Canada Council for the Arts, and it encouraged artists to get out of their comfort

zone and take risks and be ambitious! And it's weird how people always tell you to be ambitious, but my response is always "what can I do with no money?!"

So we pondered what we could do. Particularly, what could we research that we would never normally have access to? And the answer was the north. The north is almost inaccessible for normal people, for civilians. Because it's extremely expensive to go there. So there isn't a lot of tourism. You know, it's maybe \$3,000 a plane ticket to get to the closest community, but then normal commercial airlines won't go further. The people who go up north are normally construction workers, nurses and doctors, social workers. People who are working there, not just people who want to visit. And, of course, there are the Inuit communities that live there and have lived there for a very long time, who were historically nomadic until the missionaries came and they became sedentary and Christian...

So for us, just to think about the north was scary! We really knew nothing about it. That's why I say it came from a lot of naivete. Yeah... but I think you do always need a little bit of naivete at least.

But we learned we learned a tonne!

SS How long were you there for?

LD So I, personally, was never up there. Because the cost of living, and to get there, is so high that I couldn't really find a reason why it would be acceptable for me to go just to see things and hang out. Marie-Laurence went, who was making the sound creation – basically a podcast – and then around that we built the play. That is how *Aalaapi* works.

Together, at the beginning of the process, we met with young Inuit people who came down south to study. After high school here we have what we call CEGEP, which is between high school and university. So they had come down here to do CEGEP because there are none in the north. And they were mostly francophones. Most Inuit people speak English, you know, for all sorts of reasons. But these young people were francophones. Five of them agreed to be part of the documentary, and to actually build this documentary with Marie-Laurence.

And very early in the process we asked ourselves "are we as two white women the right people to do this?" And "are we even allowed to do this?" It was during the whole scandal with *Kanata* and Robert Lepage's creation of *Kanata*, which also involved some First Nations and there was a big scandal around that.

SS What was the essence of the scandal?

LD Some people felt disrespected in the process. Some people felt like they were not taken into consideration. I cannot really talk about this at all, because I don't know the details so it's hard for me to take a position. But what I heard, though, is that some people didn't feel considered and heard. And so for us the question became "how can we rethink this process so that everybody feels they're a part of this, and that they're being respected, heard and met? And we thought "this needs to be a collective. It cannot be our work but using these people's stories. This has to be a collective creation with these people" So we needed to find a way to reflect on what would it mean to work in a horizontal manner. Which is extremely difficult.

SS By working in a horizontal manner, you mean trying to spread outwards to incorporate that collective, or make it more collective?

LD To be less hierarchical when it comes to decision making, and plans, and the way of working, and how you rehearse, and stuff like that. Because you're talking to people who are nonprofessional. Sometimes they're professional artists, but not stage artists. And theatre is not a traditional practice at all up north. So there you are, making theatre down south with people from the north. So the responsibility was ours to make it a positive experience for everyone. And we had tonnes of conversations about this when we were creating the piece, after the sound documentary was made.

I began with an exploration week with four actors. And all the actors we were working with were nonprofessional, but one of them for instance, was living on the street, which is a reality for a lot of Inuit people that come down south. There are a lot of social problems in the communities, a lot of addiction problems, a huge amount of trauma. We're talking about people – between the 50s and 70s, if I'm correct – whose children were taken to boarding schools by force to be assimilated. So they would forget their language, they would forget their culture, forget their family. And they would then be sent back into the family not knowing anything anymore, and be rejected by their own community. A huge amount of trauma. Maybe that started before the 50s, I'm not sure, maybe even the 30s. And that's all the First Nations in Canada, not just Inuit. That is why we say they went through a cultural genocide. And then there was the "60s scoop", where basically Inuit people would bring their children to hospitals because they were sick, and then go back the next day to pick them up, and they were gone. They had been sent down south for adoption. And that happened in the 60s. So you can imagine the trauma these communities have gone through. And they're slowly just starting to heal now. And there are still lots and lots of issues. But anyway, it would be best to talk to a First Nations person or to an Inuit person to give you all the details.

With *Aalaapi*, we're not here to talk about all of that because that is known to most Canadians. These are things we hear a lot, and there's a lot of guilt related to that. A lot of Caucasian Canadians feel extremely guilty because of what happened to First Nations and what is still happening today. And I think that guilt is a bit of a sterile feeling. So my goal it's not to point fingers at anyone and make them feel hopeless and frozen. But with *Aalaapi*, what we tried to do was just to create something together that was a benevolent encounter.

SS I don't want to do spoilers because people may be listening to this before they watch the show at the virtual Stückemarkt. But the piece crystallises in a beautiful, witty, elegant encounter that makes me think you achieved what you aimed to do.

Is it a show that is changing for you? Not just for the Stückemarkt, but it's been two years alive in front of audiences now?

LD I think we created it at the beginning of 2019.

SS So is it something that's in development with every performance? Does it shift and change with each iteration?

LD It's pretty stable, although we are changing actresses often. Partly because they're nonprofessional actresses so they have their own lives.

Hannah for example, who created the show, is not with us anymore. She was a full-time student and mother of two who was herself quite young. So it just wasn't sustainable for her. So Ulivia replaced her. So the one that will be seen at the Stückemarkt will be with Nancy Saunders and Ulivia Uviluk.

And then in the future, we're also performing at FTA in Montreal in May. And that will be another actress replacing Nancy because Nancy's in Nunavik right now, in Northern Quebec, helping out her dad with his restaurants. The pandemic has been hard for everyone so she cannot go back and forth from Montreal and quarantine 14 days every time, so that is complicated for her. So we're having a new actress onboard. So of course, every time there are new performers, it changes quite a lot. But the content is pretty stable. I'm really happy with the show.

SS It's a really beautiful piece of work.

When you look at the different pieces you've made, and the music that you've made is included in that, do you find shared investigations and are there recurring themes in the imaginative world of Laurence Dauphinais? Are there things that you are consciously going back to?

LD I don't know if I'm *consciously* going back to things... but of course, I go back to things just like any creator.

But I feel there are holes in the culture. Things that we either don't talk about, or that are kind of mysterious. And I feel like I want to dig and fill those holes with my work. That's how I feel. So basically, a desire for a project will come when I feel like it's not talked about. So that is the only thing I can say that I'm conscious of.

SS And you're still in Montreal?

LD Yes.

SS And what does the city give you as a creative artist? What is it about Montreal that has kept you there?

LD Hmm... I think Montreal is hard to beat! It has great quality of life. It's a human scale city. 3 million people. Not too big. It's maybe the minimum I can do personally. I like big cities! But the fact that we are in kind of an insular culture, and that Quebec is the only officially Francophone province in Canada, there has been always this kind of care about preserving culture and language. And there's a lot more investment in culture and language than anywhere else in Canada. When I talk to artists in Ontario, they are so jealous of all the programmes we've had. The state basically invests three times more money than in the rest of the provinces. So we are very lucky that way. And there is a tonne of new work being done in Montreal. When I said that I didn't do classics in the end... I mean, there *are* classics around but the reality is that what is more prominent is new work. So I found a community in the theatrical community of Montreal, I can say that. I feel inspired by people. I trust the institutions. Not all of them, but a lot of them.

SS Which is no small thing in an artistic life.

LD Absolutely. It's very big. A lot of the theatres have spaces for emerging artists. There are some institutions that are only for emerging artists. So I feel very lucky.

There's also something here that is interesting, which is that artists can use lots of different mediums at once. You can be a theatre maker, and be on TV, and also do voice work and dubbing from English to French. And so people are always doing all these things, and I really like that. I like to be multitasking.

SS And that's really in your work, right? The plurality and diversity of different media you're working with is really exciting and really legible.

LD I feel that I become a better writer with every new medium that I learn. It teaches me a lot about storytelling.

SS And collaboration, you know, you're very generous when you talk about *Aalaapi*. And I love the notion of horizontal creativity and horizontal rehearsal rooms or horizontal processes. But everything that you've made, everything that you've talked about, your collaborators seem completely central to the creative process.

LD Absolutely.

SS Do you make anything alone? Or do you just cherish the communication of collaboration so much, that you wouldn't want to give it up?

LD Yeah, it's funny. I mean, I make some things alone. But you're right, that's not the majority of my work at all. Maybe because I felt alone so much in my life, you know? I really did feel alone for the most part growing up. I felt tremendously alone. And when I found this community...

SS You found a gang.

LD I mean, it's not a big gang, it's a small gang. You know, I have mostly Maxime Carbonneau who is my collaborator on so many different projects: *In the Cloud* and *Siri*, and we're developing a TV series together, and new media series together. We're together all the time. That collaboration is super precious to me. And other collaborations like with Marie-Laurence on *Aalaapi*, and with these incredible actresses that are teaching me so much.

SS And with Darrick as well!

LD Music! Yes, it's funny because when I was younger I studied classical singing for so many years, and I was really hesitant: will I become an opera singer? Or will I go into the theatre? And I ended up choosing theatre because it felt like it was less elitist. But I've always adored singing and music and composing, but I'm not a great musician. So I work with good musicians.

So yes, Darrick is a beautiful music project, but we have no time for it right now. So it's always at the margins of our lives and sometimes we go back to it. But yeah, life is so full with every other thing that music always comes second. But it is a good place for exploration and interiority. It's the same with *A Gringa*, which is the crazy music project I do in Portuguese inspired by my many times in Brazil, and where I have worked with some incredible DJs in Rio; it's always so thrilling to work with great musicians. To really share forces with other artists.

SS I'm thinking about how you describe Montreal as being very human in its scale. And I can relate that to cities that I love. I find that in Amsterdam. A little bit in Barcelona even.

LD Lisbon!

SS And then thinking as well about the video of Aalaapi that I watched, which I know you weren't a massive fan of. But I actually thought the size of that theatre and the presence of the audience was profoundly human. I really loved it when I could hear people laughing on the camera two inches away. And then the guy who stood up on his own at the end. I think that whole show has a great humanness to it. It feels like a deeply human exploration of humanness.

And then comparing that to your exploration of artificial intelligence, and wondering if there's any kind of a contradiction there? How optimistic do you feel about the future of humanity? In a world of artificial intelligence, and as we come out of this pandemic?

LD Well... when Maxime Carbonneau and I do work about anything, it's never to just praise it. It's to bring a critical eye to it. And we felt that AI was going to change everyone's lives, but nobody really talked about it. This was like five years ago. And Montreal was slowly becoming the second hub of AI in North America after Silicon Valley. And it was under the radar for most people. And so we decided to really dive in. "What does this mean having all of a sudden an assistant in your pocket that is basically listening to you all the time, that knows so much about you, that can localise you, and that sells all your data by the way?" Because people didn't know that either...

So we wanted to dig into the topic, not to scare people off, but to be critical, and to raise questions that can then allow us to make decisions as a society.

And I am scared sometimes that the policies won't come soon enough. Because what we've been seeing with technology is basically the huge companies doing whatever they want, until the governments realise the consequences and *only then* start building policy. So it feels like the populations are guinea pigs in an experiment. And only after we realise, for example, "my gosh, they're all becoming completely anxious on social networks, and the level of anorexia is going up in girls, and the level of suicide is going up" do we ask what to do about it? But my thought is, what about that sacrificed generation? I find that a little sad. I am confident though, that tech will become more ethical, because I think it's the only way to go. I don't think that the world would survive a non-ethical approach to those new technologies. But people have to be conscious that it will change everything at a rapid pace. You know, we've seen the curves of technological advancements, so it's going to be fast.

So, what can I say? I am not necessarily an enthusiast, but I am not depressed either. I think I'm a realist. And I think some developments in technology excite me very much. Some don't. I think that our responsibilities as artists particularly, is to be able to talk about them, and to bring those questions to the people in a human way.

SS Yeah, I love that. I love the possibility that the storytellers might act as some kind of ethical kind as we try to navigate this new technology.

LD I mean, being born from artificial insemination, I am basically a child of technology. My existence wouldn't have been possible without modern medicine.

And when I was in high school – I went to a Catholic college – and in a religion class we were talking about certain ethical questions that people had. Homosexuality and all these kinds of things... and people had no problem with any of it except for artificial insemination or assisted procreation. And that made me feel terrible, obviously. And I remember going to my teacher and saying "look, I have a friend who was born from artificial insemination. And maybe you should be careful because that could hurt people. What is being said in this class"

And that's something that would touch me so much when I would read Simone de Beauvoir. She has such an incredible reflection on what is natural. For so many years, we thought that women had to make babies to be natural parents and that medicine was artificial and technology was artificial. I don't agree with that. I think that the development of technology is natural for us. It is our way. We have built tools since the beginning to make our lives easier. To make life easier on our bodies because life was so hard. Technology is the continuation of that. It's the continuation of the expression of our knowledge. And it is for sure something that will help us fight climate change. *But* we do have to be intelligent about that, and not be fooled by all the greenwashing the corporations are doing; selling us these new technologies that cuddle trees because that will be good for climate change... all that bullshit. We have to remain critical with what is being offered. And we have to ask the corporations to live up to some form of ethics, which is tough because they also have to please their stockholders.

SS Talking to you, my faith in the possibility that artists, storytellers, creators can help hold our hands and navigate that ethical chaos of contradiction is restored. I have really loved talking to you, and I really love your work. I can't wait to see *Aalaapi* again, when it goes up. When is your opening night at the Stückemarkt?

LD It's the 18th of May.

SS And are you doing a performance of the show specially for filming for the Stückemarkt?

LD Yes, it has been filmed already actually. I just finished editing last night. We decided not to do a live stream version because of the threat of Covid. You know, we were all scared, like, "what if?! What if?! What if?!" so it was just safer that way. And, you know, *Aalaapi* being such a contemplative show, the work that we had to do with the cameras to accompany that contemplation and to accompany the act of listening was really interesting. The silences and the sounds. So it will be very different to the version you saw, but I think it serves the piece. And I think the surprise you were talking about at the end is kept intact.

SS Oh, that's good! I really can't wait to see it again! And I hope our paths cross in real life one day. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Laurence Dauphinais thank you very, very much indeed.

LD 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 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.

