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Playwright's Podcast Season 5 – Transcription Ta-Nia (aka Talia Paulette Oliveras & Nia Farrell) 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 presence of academia in theatre making in the United States has a status that is, I think, more pronounced or established than it seems to me to be in the UK or elsewhere in Europe. In many US cities the theatre is housed within the university. The artists and audience are often academics or students. In New York, that complex heart of the country's theatrical history, Columbia and NYU in particular provide the art form with a constant pulse of new life. Theatre in the US seems born out of a synthesis between the theoretical rigour and interrogations of its universities counterpointed with the energy and drive of the marketplace, as most famously typified in the theatre houses of Broadway.

The theatre making duo made up of director Talia Paulette Oliveras and writer Nia Farrell, collectively known as Ta-Nia, both typify this position and obliterate every last archetype it might suggest. They met while studying experimental and collaborative theatre making at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. The power of their theoretical rigour and the incision of their thought as a means of critiquing power was maybe developed at NYU, but there is no arid or academic crust to the work that Ta-Nia first developed there: the visceral, playful, humane, angry, Afrofuturist theatre event *Dreams in Blk Major*. First staged at Tisch in 2019 it transferred to the National

Black Theatre in Harlem in the same year, and then the ANT Fest, the all new talent festival at the celebrated Ars Nova Theatre. In 2020/21 it was chosen by jurors to visit the Stückemarkt at the Theatertreffen.

It is a source of some regret to me to not be able to make it to Berlin to see any of the five shows chosen for the Stückemarkt in real life. But I can't help feeling that it is a particular shame to not be in the same room as *Dreams in Blk Major* as it is played out there. Farrells text is sensuous and poetic. It explodes the conventions of linear narrative to create a text that is built on ritual more than it is on a dramatic arc. It describes itself as a celebration in five movements. Reading the text on the page, the energy of that celebration alone is infectious. Infused by the magic and dignity of music and art, it combines jazz and cookery, reinvents a school curriculum with unapologetic glory, reimagines BuzzFeed questionnaires and makes a theatrical intervention that encourages the audience to engage in a consideration of their own identities and incumbent histories. It draws from a past of centuries and imagines a new future, but invites a ritual that is necessarily defined by its present tenseness, asking its actors to really talk and really listen to one another, inviting its audience to really dance and the food that ends the piece to really be made, and to taste – I imagine – fucking fantastic! If this is a piece born out of a nuanced and complex theoretical understanding, it is also one of the most joyous and celebratory pieces of theatre I have imagined all year. Ta-Nia – Nia, Talia – welcome to the Royal Court Playwrights' Podcast and welcome to the Stückemarkt.

CONVERSATION

NF Thank you so much!

TO Thank you.

SS No, not at all. It's really, really lovely to meet you both electronically. And as I say, I'm really sad that I'm not getting to see the show in real life and to meet you both in real life.

I can't decide yet whether I'm just going to use the word Ta-Nia and invite answers from both of you. Or kind of... well, let's just see how we get on...

So I always ask the same question with every interview that I do because I have literally no imagination and on occasion it is quite a good question – I'm really fascinated to hear from both of you on this – so the question is, when was the first time that you went to the theatre? Ta-Nia?

NF Oh, gosh. I think remember mine.

I think my first theatrical excursion was at the Pantages Theatre in Los Angeles where I saw *Wicked* with my mother. I don't remember much other than a really big dragon. And someone flying, and it feeling really emotionally resonant! This was maybe when I was 10 or so. And I thought "that's the power!"

Though I probably didn't say that as a child. I probably just thought it was cool. But looking back now and wanting to sound more articulate, I bet I was thinking that that's the transformative work I would like to make.

SS It's really beautiful description of a beautiful moment. Are you from LA?

NF Yeah, originally born in Southern California. Spent six years in Pennsylvania, in Amish country, and then found my way back to California and then moved to New York.

SS And Talia, how about you? Where were you first at the theatre?

TO So I am a born and raised New Yorker!

SS You did something with your fingers there?!

TO It was... like, a sideways peace sign, which I guess is a way of representing my New York-ness.

SS It communicated itself beautifully to me. I got it immediately.

TO Thank you!

SS Whereabouts in New York are you from?

TO So I grew up right outside of the Bronx in a town called Mount Vernon. So I was always moving between Westchester, which is the county right outside of the city, and the city itself. And so naturally my first memorable experience at least, was Broadway. I remember seeing *Phantom of the Opera* at six years old. I actually really wanted to be an opera singer. It was my first dream.

SS Inspired by the phantom?

TO Naturally! My grandmother used to listen to a lot of Pavarotti when I was growing up, and there's something about his voice that made me want to do opera. And so they took me to see *Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway and I had the perfect seat in the middle where the chandelier fell right over my head. And I was like "forget about opera! What is this?! This is fun!" So fell in love with theatre at that moment and never gave it up.

SS And you both had family members who encouraged this interest? And took you to the theatre?

Nia, who in your family was taking you?

NF My mom, actually, is a singer so I got a lot of my performance self from her. And then my dad is the organiser. So he sent me to all the camps and the community theatre programmes. So the combination of them both I felt was extremely supportive. And my brother as well, you know, he was holding the camera, so give him a little shout out.

SS Your brother as well! What's your brother called?

NF My brother's name is Alec. He's a lawyer. Hey, congratulations, bro.

SS He got a proper job!

What about you Talia? Did you have a supportive family who were encouraging?

TO Yeah, for me it was basically entirely my grandmother. She was the one who would watch movies and see Broadway shows and listen to opera, and she encouraged me to do the same. She put me in my first after school arts programme. Fought for me to join a year younger than was allowed. So I joined when I was seven, I believe, and then I just stayed there throughout the rest of my educational career basically.

SS Gosh. In all of these conversations Talia you might be the youngest starter. 7 years old is a pretty early start in a life on the stage. That's really great.

Was it something that stayed with you throughout your teenage years? This kind of commitment to, or fascination with theatre?

TO Yeah, definitely. So I started with that arts programme, and just really, really fell in love with it. And then when I got to high school, I actually went to a high school that had a specialised arts programme. So there I did more of an intensive acting training programme. And then I was like, "yeah, I'm definitely going to college for this. This is all I want to do in my life" And so it felt easy, if that makes sense? Like, I knew what my path was going to be.

SS Yes, if you've got that clarity of decision then there is almost no decision at all. It's just like, well, that's what I'm gonna do. And was it the same for you Nia?

NF I was caught between two worlds. I played volleyball for a little bit, and I was convinced I was gonna play D1 at Penn State! That did not happen as I played "left bench" for most of my volleyball career! So it was my senior year when I really committed to the drama programme. I went to a summer arts programme. And that really made me feel like I was confident. I was making a choice rather than my parents putting me in programmes. So that choice to audition for schools and see what would happen was made.

SS And can I ask you Nia, what kind of stuff were you into as a teenager? What was your imaginative world? What were you watching? What were you reading? What theatre were you going to of your own volition? Or what films were you watching?

NF I would say when I was younger it was a lot of the commercial stuff that was just presented to me and was readily available. I think in terms of my imaginative life, I would be inventing games in my closet and building worlds outside with Legos, using that whole part of the imaginative brain. Building spaces.

I think when I really came into my Afrofuturist imaginative self, was in college when Talia and I were part of the MLK Scholars Programme at NYU, where within one year we went to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I took this African American drama class, and then I also went to the National Black Theatre for the first time. It was this perfect storm of blackness, where I realised the imagination can be used to build futures that I can exist in and invite others in to, and in a theatrical way as well.

SS That's really beautiful.

I really want to talk about Afrofuturism because it's a new term to me, because as I said, I'm ignorant about pretty much everything! But it was really thrilling to read about it and know that my love of Funkadelic and Sun Ra might have led me there without my knowing. But before we talk about that I'm interested in what New York meant to you as a Californian? Was it a holy grail of a place? Was it somewhere that you dreamed of going to?

NF When I auditioned for schools that were outside of New York, people said "New York is going to be there your entire life. Go somewhere else and develop your training and then you'll get there" And I got to a point where I thought "well, why wait to get there? If I can become acclimated to the city and the energy while in school, isn't that a benefit? To be part of the community that I'm going to be creating theatre with?" So I definitely saw New York as the holy grail for theatre. I love California's theatricalness but it's not quite as prevalent as Hollywood is. You identify LA as Hollywood. So knowing that theatre and live performance is what I was drawn to, New York felt like the centre. The place where ideas start and are disseminated, or where ideas from regional theatres come to, to reach larger audiences.

SS And Talia for you, was there ever a question of leaving the city? Or do you feel a New Yorker in your metabolism?

TO It's a little bit of both. I feel New York is always gonna be my lamppost. It will always be where I return to. I think it's very intrinsic to who I am in terms of the pacing and way of life. The 24/7-ness in particular. Whenever I leave New York, when it hits 2am or 5am I'm always thinking "Where is everyone?"

But since going to college, that's when I started getting interested in leaving. And now I'm really interested in learning about theatre elsewhere. Growing up as a New Yorker, I do think we often have an impulse to stay. And when you learn theatre in New York there is a lot of emphasis on New York being the centre of theatre. So a lot of teachers growing up would say "why would you go anywhere else?" So I think I'm unlearning that, and it's been really exciting working now across borders and seeing what art looks like across borders. And I'm intrigued by that. I've never been to California, so I don't even know what that world is like. So I'd love to, to dabble and to dip my toes elsewhere.

SS Do you guys remember when you first met?

I feel like I want to mute Talia and get Nia to tell me the story and then reverse the process! But I'm not gonna do that...

NF That fateful day on the square at New York University. It was like a pre-college thing. If you were an admitted student, you could come to NYU and check out the vibe. And we were put in the same group.

Is that what it was?

TO Yeah. So specifically for the students who got offered the scholarship programme. They put us together basically, so we could all learn what the programme is and get a little bit more specific, I guess. So we were put together by NYU as roommates for this weekend. At 17 years old, I guess?

SS Wow. Speaking from a British perspective, the roommate is an element of American or US university/college stories which always terrifies me! We don't have that in UK universities and the idea always distressed me! But clearly it's fucking brilliant!

NF I mean, it doesn't work out well 99% of the time! Based on my friends... no I'm not even gonna say!

But this roommate experience worked out really well because we then studied abroad in Paris together as roommates, and just ended up in the same circles again and again. And we just decided to listen to the universe when it gave us these signs, like "okay, I guess we'll do something together then"

TO It did take us a while though, because we met when we were 17. And then we were roommates that same freshman year, so we were still 17/18. And then we kind of went our own ways for the first two years, I would say, of college. And it wasn't until junior or senior year that we came back together. And we were like "enough is enough!" We keep seeing each other over and over and over again, right? We might as well just have a relationship and talk about art and maybe even make art together.

NF So it's like the first email reaching out after maybe a year, and it's like "hi Talia, I don't know, if you remember me, I'm Nia, I'd love to like get coffee and talk about your work" And then we just haven't stopped facetimeing and talking since.

SS I'm interested, because of what I've read about your work beyond *Dreams in Blk Major*, in the role of thought, or theory, or thinking? As you said Nia, your discovery of black identity and all the theoretical politics and experiences surrounding that was so rich and deep and exciting. I'm interested, was this something that you both brought to one another? Perhaps you didn't realise you had this shared interest? So what was the story academically or intellectually between the two of you?

NF I think I was more often floating ideas, and then Talia came in with the rigour. Because you had your undergraduate thesis, right?

TO Yeah, I did double major in what was called social and cultural analysis. So I basically studied, alongside theatre, gender, race, and sexuality relations, from a more theoretical perspective. So I think I had that knowledge. And then Nia had a lot of the Afrofuturist knowledge that I actually didn't know about. So I feel like those were the two sides that came together, but we're both very academic at heart.

SS And I want to know about how you use academia in your work, because there is nothing arid about this. It is such a live, living thing. Thought feels very much alive in your work. But before we talk about that process, and accommodating theory into practice, tell me about Afrofuturism?

NF So that is a *huge* thing! I recommend anyone who's listening to just start the Google dive, or whatever search platform you prefer, start that dive. Our particular flavour or brand of Afrofuturism is Mundane Afrofuturism, which was coined by Martine Syms who generated this manifesto, talking about Afrofuturism as something that's very tangible and exists on this earth. What I like to say is *Black Panther* is a great example of Afrofuturism, because it's talking about an Africa in which slavery didn't happen, and there's Vibranium that allows us to tap into these powers. From

my perspective, that is so awesome. I also can't wait for Vibranium to exist, and also slavery *did* happen. So what are we gonna do about it and what exists on this earth currently, that can help us generate the futures that we want to have in which we are as liberated as the people of Wakanda? So that is a good entry point for Mundane Afrofuturism. Bringing the theory down to the earth, our bodies, the ritual practices that we can do on our own and in community.

SS It's a really clear definition. The piece which you've talk about, the HuffPost summary, which is called something like "What the Fuck is Afrofuturism?" – probably not "what the fuck" on the HuffPost actually – but that has a real clarity and lucidity to it.

Mundane always seems like a slightly insulting adjective for something that takes something fun and imaginative which was born out of science fiction, and makes it practical and actual, and a living process of thought. But the way it informs your piece, I think, is really tangible. When did you know you were going to make work together rather than just hang out and talk about theory?

TO It was actually *Dreams in Blk Major*. Nia basically... well I don't know if you want to talk about the origin story of *Dreams in Blk Major* Nia?

NF So *Dreams in Blk Major* started as a self-scripting piece, which is a form used in a solo performance class that I took at NYU. And there were two other black students in the class and my overall intention was to make pieces that were for and about them. So that meant like, only talking to them, only making sure that they could hear, if there was something visual those two people were the only people who could see it. And so each of those little solo performances were brought together to make *Dreams in Blk Major*. And then I came to Talia knowing that, one: she had knowledge about the theory of what this is, and the history of what black theatre is, and what are conversations are we adding to, and who are we in conversation with, and then also: an ability to actualize dreams on stage unlike any other director that I've worked with. For example, I come to Talia saying that I want a tree in the centre of the stage. How are we going to do that? How are we going to build a tree? But she understands the essence of what I want and makes that happen. Talia is a dream actualizer.

SS What a beautiful job title!

TO I know! I'll put that on my resume going forward.

SS I think ideologically and politically I really get this impulse to make work only for the other black artists in the... did you say it was a self-scripting class?

NF Yes. So there are only two other black drama students in the class, and making it for them was about saying "how often do we walk into spaces in the United States, in particular, and the space is built for us. And we feel like our wholeness is accepted and is celebrated?"

SS It might be in the United States in particular, but I don't think this is the case in the United States exclusively. I'm sure there are black people listening to this throughout Europe... Noush will probably tell me the figures now and say there are only actually 7 people listening to this conversation... But your experience really resonates with my understanding of going to the theatre in the UK, for sure. And in

Germany. So I love the energy and clarity with which you're combating that. So Talia, Nia brought you these scenes, or these pieces – what was your reaction reading them?

TO Well, immediately I fell in love with them. Just because, like you said earlier, the joy is infectious. It resonates off the page. And I felt like I wanted to jump into the world immediately. So I was super excited to just play with the piece. And I think something that really excited me as well was the challenge in the piece to make it for black people, but also not letting non-black people off the hook, if you will. So I think there's a really active engagement that the piece asks non-black people to have. And so I felt like a lot of my job when I first got the script was really thinking about that and thinking about the different audience experiences that we're curating. While also still making it fundamentally a ritual for black people.

SS Were those challenges present in the text before you read it? Or are these things that you developed together? How complete was the text when you first read it?

TO The text was very different from where it is now. It was much smaller. I would say it was primarily monologue based when we first started. So I would say that when I joined, the first step was figuring out what the world was and the rhythm of the piece, and a lot of those textural things. That's then when theory started coming in. And slowly we started expanding the piece. And it was definitely a collaborative effort as well, with the actors. In all of our processes we like to give agency to anyone who's touching the work, to let us know what they see, what they're missing, what they want more of, and really bring themselves to it. So the piece evolved a lot as we had more actors touch it as well.

SS It's really interesting, in several of the conversations I've had with artists from the Stückemarkt this year, that embracing of collaboration, the acknowledging of the authorial role of everybody involved, designers and actors alike, not just writers or directors, is really infectious. And it's interesting that it seems to be something present in the thinking of theatre makers in London, in Montreal, in New York, all over the place. How important is that to you? That your actors are artists to? That your designers are artists? Nia you're nodding with real energy.

NF Yeah, I resonate with that heavily because the reason I became more of a creator and not solely an actor is because I wanted to have more agency in developing pieces, and not just be a body on stage to execute a vision. And so inviting our collaborators, whether they be actors, designers etc, to contribute themselves – especially in this piece which is about dreams. And we don't want it to be the dreams of a single person, we want it to reach a diaspora – so inviting everyone to contribute themselves to the work makes the piece all that more accessible.

SS So what did you do with the actors? Did you ask them to create things themselves? What was the process?

TO Yes. I love devising, personally, within any process. So we did a lot of that. I think the very first rehearsal, I brought in a poem and it was a lot of talking and a lot of free thinking and free writing. And then a lot of the process was that. We did a lot of child work, having the actors just dream and play and build. A lot of movement work, both Nia and myself, as Nia mentioned, we're multi-hyphenates. So we both

have performance backgrounds. So Nia does a little bit more movement which is dance-like and choreographic. And my movement is a little bit more ritualistic and yoga based. So we would bring those together as well in the room, and let that kind of unlock different things for the actors. And sometimes they would even come up with ideas like "let's try this exercise" So it was a very playful process, I would say.

SS It's something I've always been fascinated by. I think for 20 odd years I've thought of myself as a writer. You know, I think of myself as a playwright, but when I've worked or hung out with, or spent time with people who devise, that level of playfulness is so exciting to me. I really envy you that. Do you think of yourself as a writer, Nia? Do you have the opposite of my yearning to be in a devising room?

NF I've been going through a hyphenate journey. Sometimes I will say "creator". Something about "writer" makes me feel there is more of a defined form to it. And I realise that a lot of what I end up writing feels ritual based. So "creator", "community organiser", "ritual builder", "dreamer"... those all sound lofty.

When it does come down to it: yes, I do write. I write things. So that would make me a writer. But I've been getting a little artsy fartsy with it so I guess I'll do it and say I'm a "dreamer"!

SS I don't know, it's funny, for me it was something I had always wanted to be from when I was six years old. Because I'd read things that had made me feel less lonely in the world. And I just wanted to do that job. But the more I do it, the more I think that maybe you're right. It's not the noun that counts. It's not being a "writer". And being a writer also has all kinds of connotations, which are romantic or hierarchical. It's just about the verb not the noun. It's about "writing", not being a "writer"

NF Exactly. It's the act of bringing people together. I love that idea. Defining ourselves by what we do versus the noun that feels more solid and in a place of stasis. I bring people together to actualize dreams and to build their futures.

SS How long were you devising for?

NF I think my first devised piece was for a Young Jean Lee play in my sophomore year. And she invited us to be performers and writers in the process. So that was the first time where it was like, "okay, I can offer ideas *and* execute them" And from that moment on I found myself drawn toward processes that were more devising based, and a lot of them in rooms that Talia was involved with also.

SS And those first iterations of *Dreams in Blk Major*, how long were you able to work with your collaborators on the development of that?

TO Not long. I mean, we don't get a lot of time ever when we're making theatre, but from when I stepped in, when we first started expanding the piece, we did a staged reading in a week or two.

NF Yeah, we said "let's all get in a room for a few hours a day. And then at the end of the week, we'll show it to people" We're *always* prepping for a one-night-only. I feel like *Dreams in Blk Major* has been done like three times as a one-night-only. So the process is like, "you have two weeks. Is that enough time?" and we're like "okay, we'll take it"

SS Was that at Tisch, the original one-night-only?

NF Yeah, so it was through Tisch but was performed at National Black Theatre, because there was something really important about bringing this piece to a black space. Like, in its first iteration, what is it to walk into a black owned space in Harlem, and have that be the given circumstances? Versus walking into an institution that's predominantly *white* and having to deconstruct that. If we were already walking into a space in which we belong, we were already on our way. So that was the first two week process that we had.

Can you tell me about National Black Theatre? I've never been there so I don't know about it because I am, as I said, massively ignorant.

NF Oh, no, not at all. National Black Theatre is on the corner of 125th Street and 5th Avenue in Harlem, New York. It was founded by Dr. Barbara Ann Teer who is this incredible theatre maker, performer – she was a dancer at some point. And she built this mecca for black artists to go on a “soul journey”, which is a phrase I love! There is a technique called “the Teer Technology of Soul” – and I don't know too much about that specific part of it, but she called her actors “liberators”, so there are “liberators” who understand the practice far better and could tell you all about it – but it is essentially allowing black artists to tap into the soul of what their work is, and share that with others. And so National Black Theatre is a building that is completely black owned and black run, her daughter Sade Lythcott now runs the theatre. It's a beautiful space, where black artists can go to find themselves and to celebrate themselves.

SS It sounds really gorgeous. I love the idea of a “soul journey”

So how was it received when you gave the play life? What were your memories of its first night?

TO It's so funny because we talk about it often. The memory of the piece is very *different* from the concrete facts of that performance, in the sense that it was very hodgepodge, the way we had to do it. We sourced a lot of the set ourselves, the costume was really thrown together last minute, it was very classic college students trying to figure it out. But somehow, the memory of the thing is *huge* and really long lasting. We still to this day have students who are younger than us come to us and say that that was one of their first empowering memories of seeing a theatre piece while at NYU, which is something I hold on to because that's huge for me.

And then even my mother saw the piece, and my mother is not black. So spoiler for those who haven't seen or read our piece, but we separate the audience. And so black people sit up front and non-black people sit in the back. And my mother is non-black. So she had a really interesting experience that we spoke about, of wanting to join us and be with her kids. Be with the black side of the piece, if you will. But knowing that that wasn't necessarily her place in the piece. It was a huge discovery we made in that first iteration, in terms of what exactly are we doing for non-black people, especially non-black people of colour? What is that experience where you're not quite experiencing the piece in the same way that our white audience members are, but it's also not really for you either because you're not black. So that was a really nuanced

discovery that we made, and we're still interested by and unpacking. Nia do you have anything to add?

NF Well, memory is a tricky word. Because I was performing in the piece, so I have no recollection of what happened on that stage. I see photos and I recognise that that was a night I participated in, but I have no memory of what was actually done. But there was a collective spirit. I feel like everyone who saw it at National Black Theatre imagines sepia tones everywhere, and it feels larger than life, and it is remembered as this really big communal gathering. If you look at some of the photos, which don't have that sepia tone, it's like "what is that stark white wall? Why didn't they put anything on the walls? What was the set design?" But I choose to put those tangible memories aside and live in the spiritual memories.

SS I think that's really fascinating because looking at those productions stills – which are available on the internet – of a performance in what looks like a rehearsal room, there's something really exquisite about a rehearsal room aesthetic, because it demands that the experience plays out in your imagined space, not in the actual space. It's not a beautiful room, but it's a beautiful, shared imaginative space. And I can really imagine that from looking at those photos. I think that's really lovely.

TO And I think that's something we tapped into too, because we played a lot on the senses. We had incense going and different things like that. Like pictures that the actors put up throughout the space. And a lot of that also helped to create this ephemeral, imaginative space that you're talking about.

SS I would love to talk about your mum's reaction, because what's fascinating about the piece is that it necessarily draws attention to the audience. For instance, I can't remember a piece in which I was singled out because I was not black, and politically, ideologically, I think it's a brilliant, necessary provocation. Because of course, someone might say "well, I've never seen a white writer do that" Well, white writers don't need to do that. For hundreds of years it has been innate in the process of theatre that, as you say, they feel like white spaces. But I was thinking, what would I do if I went with a black mate and I had to move to the back while they had to move to the front? Tell me about your mum's reaction? If that's not a really selfish question on my behalf. Just because I've never come across that in a piece of theatre before. The separation of the audience on those grounds.

TO It was so interesting! So my mother in particular – my mom is not black but *all* of her children are black and she came to see the show, and brought my younger brothers with her, and her sister who is also not black. And for context, I'm Dominican and Puerto Rican. So we span many different races within those two cultures. And it was interesting because she kept my younger brothers with her throughout the show, but it is only in the final moments when we escort the black audience members to a separate space that she could not go to. And when she explained it to me she said "you know, after you all went up there, I really battled with myself because I was gonna go with you because when I looked around the space I saw a lot of white people and didn't feel like I belonged. But I also didn't feel like I belonged up there with you. So then I was in this weird in-between space, where I wasn't sure what to do" And at that time, we didn't really account or even think about the non-black person of colour experience. So that really opened a *huge* conversation for us. So from then on we have

a part of the piece where we provide what we call “tangible tactics”, which are questions or offerings or actions that we ask, basically non-black audience members to do to engage with the work further beyond the theatrical space. And at that time, we had it but it was very focused on the white experience. And so starting from my mom’s experience in particular, we started to question “what is that?” It’s still the same task fundamentally of holding space for black people. But that interrogative work, I think, is a little bit of a different ask for non-black people of colour. “How do I have anti blackness perhaps within me, but also what is my proximity or lack of proximity to whiteness, and how does that impact my relationship to blackness? To self? To society as a whole?”

SS I’d not come across the phrase “hold space” before. I don’t know if it is a US phrase...

NF I feel like it’s a theatre school phrase!

“We’re gonna hold space for the experience” “We’re not going to centre ourselves” What are other ways to talk about it Talia?

TO I would say there are two definitions of it. The first is that theatre school definition of just like “let’s sit in the moment” And then I think the way we use “hold space” is more like “how can you decentre yourself?” How can you really and truly engage with a piece, knowing it’s not for you or about you, which is something that we as black people are asked to do quite often. We have to do the job of fitting ourselves into work or just accepting that something’s not created with us in mind. And so we use holding space as flipping that on its head and asking non-black people to do that same thing.

SS I thought it was such a beautiful gesture when I googled the definition of it. And the kind of generosity of that I found really moving. It’s my fault that so far a lot of our conversation has been about how white people have reacted. But I’m fascinated by how your black audience have reacted to the experience of the show, which is built for them? Has it affected your audiences in the way that you hoped?

NF I hope so. Talia is giving a confident head nod “yes” So I’m going to say yes! It feels like a hug every time someone comes up to us and says “hey, I saw your piece and it changed my relationship to how I walk into rooms and how I can be more celebratory of myself” Being in that black only space and seeing the smiles on everyone’s faces when they see each other in those moments. You know, how often do we get these spaces? And even more, how can we create them in our own lives?

SS Just because there might be people listening to this who haven’t yet read or seen the play, and might not get to see it, that relates to the gesture at the end of the play doesn’t it? Which is described, I think, as “Juneteenth”. It’s at the end of the “Juneteenth” part, and you take all the black audience into a room which, in the description in the script, sounds fucking great! With music and they get games, and they get food, and it just sounds immense! So that’s the black space you’re taking your audience into?

NF Yes, we take them into their own space to enjoy a meal together, to have conversation, to listen to live music, the dream version of what that moment could be. And I think what’s really important is that people don’t walk away feeling like “oh,

this is the only time I'll have that" That it's only with this piece that this space exists. We want to empower them to remember this feeling and carry it forward, and craft that for themselves in any space they walk into.

SS It is really interesting that, I think, at least three of the pieces chosen by the Stückemarkt also invite the audience to hang out with the artists afterwards. Like, Jude Christian does the same with *Nanjing*. Which seems like, just in itself, a gesture that undermines conventional notions of the artist and the distinction between the artists and the audience. But I think there's something really inspiring about that. Talia are you often in those rooms? Because you're not performing in the piece but when you're watching it, what's it like going into those rooms as a non-performer?

TO It changes every time, I'll say. So it was really interesting, actually, the first iteration we did at National Black Theatre versus the second one we did at Ars Nova, where in the first one we got to do that moment the way it was imagined by both of us, which was escorting black people to this separate, gorgeous, open space filled with natural light. Whereas in the second iteration, we actually had to escort the non-black people out. So we had a new task of transforming the space that previously been for everyone into a space that was now specifically just for us. And it was really interesting, watching as a non-performer in both scenarios, where the first time we did it at National Black Theatre, it felt like a gift. It almost felt like a surprise party where you don't know where you're going, but when you arrive it is way better than anything you could have imagined. And people really took to the space and made it their own. We offered a few prompts and activities, and people expanded upon them and created more activities. And it was really, really fun. And then the second time we did it, it was a little bit more grounded, it felt a little bit more like we all had to take a breath together and really just look at each other and take a moment to acknowledge that everyone else was gone before we could have that same freedom. And it felt a little bit more ancestral in that way. ~~We took that~~ breath together, we stood in a circle and looked at each other, and then I could feel that there was energy behind all of us. And I think there was only maybe 20 of us or so in the space, but it felt like there was 50 of us. And then people just walked around and did the same things that happened at National Black Theatre, but it took a little more work for us to get to that point.

SS I love the description of the presence of that history with you as well. That's really moving. There's something really powerful about that.

You've been working on it in the past year for its new iteration in Berlin. What is the work you've been doing in the past year on it? How has it been reshaped in the past 12 months?

NF So in the original scripts there are places for the actors to insert their own dreams, but these were sprinkled here and there. In this next iteration we have expanded the number of open spaces. It used to be called Mad Libs, now we're calling them Black Libs... and these Black Libs are opportunities to insert your dreams, your favourite person, your favourite food. And so hopefully, there's more agency and opportunity for the performers and creators to bring themselves and share themselves with their audience, because since this is online it will be shared with an audience larger than Berlin, but what's important is to talk to your community. This isn't about

reaching our friends out here in New York. Talk to your people. What do they need to hear?

TO And if I can get a little bit more theoretical with the piece, with everything that has happened in America this past summer, with the resurgence of Black Lives Matters as a movement, we just really wanted to add a little bit more complexity to that conversation. To acknowledge that it is not easy to engage in this Afrofuturist work, and Mundane Afrofuturist work in particular, when as a black person there's a lot of tension and a lot of different modes of thought within this one theory. So we wanted to engage that a little bit more and have a little bit more communication and conversation between the characters to reflect those different thought processes, and the different approaches to future. Have a little bit more of an intergenerational approach to the work as well, just to kind of expand that universe.

SS Because the generational shifts in black theory, and all kinds of political theory are as acute, I imagine now, as they have ever been. You know, your perspectives may be very different than those of your parents or even those people 10 years older, or 10 years younger than you. That must be an experience you're finding every time you make the piece?

NF Definitely. I'm so excited for people who are not 20-year-olds coming out of college to have this piece. Because in its first iteration it was very pleasure oriented, where it's like "I've been in this school for four years, and I just want to have a space that's for me, so I'm gonna make it as much of a dreamland as possible" But like, what do our elders have to say? And what do kids younger than us have to say? What do they envision for the future that they're going to be living in? Building out all of those entry points was really important to us.

SS Talia you've been in Berlin before and you've spoken about what it was like to visit Berlin as a black theatre maker.

TO Yes, I studied there while at NYU, so I was there for about five or six months in the spring of 2018. And it was difficult. It was exciting. It was so much fun, but it was difficult and especially once I got past, I want to say, the three month mark I realised that I had been asked to put my blackness aside, not directly, but I had been asked to put it aside. So it got to a point where I was seeking it out a little bit more. I knew that there had to be a black community there, there had to be a black history there, but I wasn't finding it anywhere. And I even asked my professors at the time, for a little bit more context of what black theatre, if it exists, looks like. What does the black community look like here? And they couldn't even provide me with those answers, which unlocked a lot for me in terms of the different way that blackness operates in different places. Whereas here in America, I would say, racism to call it what it is, is very overt. And so here, if I asked about those things, I can get a pretty clear answer. It's a little easier, even moving from state to state to pick up what blackness looks like, or how it operates. Whereas when I travel, because I also studied away in Amsterdam during my NYU career, and in both places while it operated very differently I found that it was very unspoken, and passive. The same for my experience of racism and my experience of the culture. And it wasn't until my very last week there that I met a few black artists. It took that long, like six months. And it took me really digging to even find that. I really wish we could actually be going to Berlin for

Stückemarkt this year, so I could see what that community looks like and speak to the artists who are working on our piece a little bit more, but it's been so amazing to talk to them about their experience as well. And we've been doing research and learning a little bit more about the Afro-German experience from our end, because, you know, we're academics at heart as we said! It's been interesting to learn... it just seems like it is part of the culture to not be outspoken about blackness, which is interesting.

SS When I've written black characters in my plays that have been produced in Germany in the past, I've often been told there are no black actors in German theatre ensembles. And so it's impossible to cast black actors in those roles. So I'm really fascinated to discover the exploration of your piece in Berlin and see what that does to Berlin theatre.

NF Well there will be no more lying about that! There they are. Right there! On stage!

SS Exactly. You've managed to find them. You've managed to create a black German ensemble. That's gonna be such a beautiful provocation for German theatre.

TO We can take no credit for that!

SS Well, you take the credit of having initialised it! Generated it originally, you can accept that credit!

Are you in contact with the artists who are making it? Because tell us about what the people who watch it online will see? What form will the show take? Or do you really have no idea? You just gave them the script and they're getting on with it.

TO Yeah, we're kind of practising relief... because Nia and myself tend to have a heavy hand on our work because we're a duo and tend to fill a lot of the roles ourselves. But this has been a really awesome exercise in releasing the script and letting people play, and I think because it is across diaspora and we really want them to tap into what it means to explore blackness within their specific community, and their specific understanding of their world, their city, etc. We're trying to release even more. But what we do know and are super excited about is that there's going to be Jamaican food involved. Very excited about that! Very jealous that we can't eat it, or at least I am! And we've been looking up the cast and are excited about the diversity there. Some of them are students, and some of them have been doing theatre for a while, and one of them is actually an ensemble member, which is exciting to me, because clearly they do exist.

SS Are they at the Gorki theatre?

TO Yes, at the Gorki.

SS The Gorki Theatre seems to be fighting a lone battle in terms of diversity, in Berlin at least.

Presumably you won't have a real audiences though, which is a bit of a shame? Have you been rethinking it for online or is that the work of the director?

NF The director is trying to figure out what exactly can be incorporated on a digital platform so that black audience members tuning in can still contribute and bring

themselves. So there may be a live chat function, something like that... But yeah, it won't be in person. Fingers crossed we will be able to get out there soon and maybe have an in person experience.

SS That would be so exciting. And what's the future of Ta-Nia? Have you decided yet?

TO Yes, well, for a while we've been in a writer/director lab with Soho Rep, which is a theatre here in New York.

SS A great theatre!

TO Yes! *We love Soho Rep!* Shout out to them.

And we've been developing our second piece, which is called *A Map to Know Where Things Are*. Which has been amazing. And because of the pandemic we have created an offshoot project of that called *The Map Project*, which was a way for us to engage in our devising and collaborative process without necessarily having to get in a room with 15 people. So that was awesome because we were able to reach about 250-ish people. So now we have a wealth of submissions and things to work with in developing our piece.

And Nia, what else?

NF I think we're just exploring more ways to bring people together. Whether that be in person, outdoors, in virtual spaces. We're now two years post grad and are continuing to build upon the academic and community organising work that is, to me, really exciting.

SS I really, really hope I get to experience it, and hold space for you for a while. That'd be really something. Talia, Nia – Ta-Nia – thank you very, very much indeed.

TO Thank you.

NF Thank you.

TO I really enjoyed this conversation.

NF Yes!

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.