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Playwright's Podcast Season 5 – Eve Leigh 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 Theatrtreffen 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.

One of the most exasperating myths in the various narratives that surround new playwriting culture is that playwrights ever burst into the playwriting world from nowhere. A prominent literary figure at the Royal Court used to talk about such hypothetical playwrights coming 'from Mars.' The truth is that those playwrights who arrive suddenly into the new writing scene have often spent years working with tenacity and determination on their craft and process before they appear to emerge from outer space and take the world by surprise.

Occasionally over the past couple of decades it has been a privilege to watch some writers make that journey. One striking example for me is the playwright Eve Leigh whose *Midnight Movie* is one of the juror choices in this year's Stückemarkt.

I first met Eve in the early years of the last decade when she sent her play *Stone Face* to the Lyric Hammersmith while I was Associate there. The play was striking for the clarity of its vision and the muscular poetry of its writing. We met to talk about her work and have stayed in touch over the last decade. I am proud to think of her as a friend.

Over that time, she has written at least a play a year. Receiving her work has always been a joy. But there was a moment two or three years ago, with her plays *Salty Irina*

and *The Trick* when it became clear that the years of work had started to play off. Here were plays of force and confidence. The lyrical petrify was now being matched by a sense of theatrical adventure and musical and clarity and cogency of idea.

And then in 2019 she appeared from nowhere, a playwright coming from outer space to hit our major stages. While earlier productions had caught some people's eye: *Spooky Action At A Distance* was produced by the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama at the Gate Theatre. Roy Alexander Weise directed *Stone Face* at the Finborough. It was in 2019 that *The Trick* premiered at the celebrated Bush theatre. *Salty Irina* was shortlisted for the Bruntwood Prize and Rachel Bagshaw directed *Midnight Movie* at the Royal Court.

Leigh is a writer of range and conviction. Her work is defined by a formal exploration as much as an intellectual one. Her theatre is built on an understanding of the importance of the presence of the audience in her work. She invents games for them to play. She imagines magic tricks for them to take part in. She makes music for them to listen to.

She is a writer of real political exploration. In recent years her commitment to the investigation of issues of ability and access in the theatre have been integrated into her work in a way that is as theatrical and playful as it is serious and nuanced. She has examined, as a journalist as a well as a dramatist, the repeated depiction of violence against women in drama. She has written with compassion and understanding of the experience of the Eastern European diaspora, a diaspora that her own family was informed by and built around.

If 2019 was a breakthrough year then 2020 may have been an unwelcome interruption, but one of the most surprising oddities of that baffling pandemic – and one of the most playful explorations of theatre in its lockdowns – was the series of emails she sent headed *Invisible Summer*. Gifs, short films, poems, pieces of music that explore the territory surrounding *Midnight Movie*.

Midnight Movie is a play about the internet. It is also a play that seeks to dramatise the form of the internet. It's a play about how we can become addicted to the solace and titillation, the voyeuristic horrors and the sense of community however dislocated or fictional or untrustworthy, that the internet can offer. It is a play that spans continents in the way the internet does, and which reshapes and reimagines itself with every refresh the way the internet does.

It tells the story of a night of migraine induced insomnia for the unnamed narrator of the play that seems to be a fictionalised version of Leigh. It returns to those investigations of diaspora, disability and voyeurism. It builds those investigations into its very form. Its opening stage directions insist that it should be performed by multiple people, ideally with visible and invisible disabilities, and that the performers and artistic team should consider some of the languages of accessibility – sign languages, captioning, audio description, live voice – and how they might be part of telling this story.

Returning to our old email conversations in preparation for this interview, I found one from 2013 in which Eve exclaimed how much she had loved visiting the Theatertreffen

and the Stückemarkt, and wondering if I knew any ways that she may be able to return.

I am thrilled that the way she managed to get back there, even if only virtually, is through the calibre and brilliance of her work. Eve Leigh, welcome to the Royal Court Playwright's Podcast and welcome to the Stückemarkt.

CONVERSATION

EL I'm really resisting... all I want to do is scream! I'm deeply embarrassed and really honoured.

SS Don't be embarrassed. What's fun about that introduction is I didn't need to lie about any of it.

It's funny doing these conversations because on occasion, the fact that theatre is a village means I do talk to people who are friends of mine. And sometimes they were successful, established writers before they were friends of mine, like talking to Joe Penhall or Dennis Kelly or Lucy Prebble or whatever, but it's really fun to be able to talk to you having seen you from the very start of your working life.

EL As a real baby playwright.

It's also really fun because Emily Legg, the ghost in the machine of this series, was also the co-sound designer of *Midnight Movie*. So it's fun this is wound around to the same team.

SS Producer Emily, a rock star of the sound world.

You know what my first question is going to be. I know you know because it is the same first question that I always ask everybody. Because I have, as I've said on many occasions, literally no imagination.

When was the first time that you went to the theatre?

EL I don't really remember is the answer. The thing that I flashback to is a Hanukkah play from Hebrew school, when I was pretty small. And I also flashback to another time and wonder "is it possible that the first time I went to see a play, I was actually in the play?" And I don't think that is possible. But yes, my earliest vivid memories of theatre are seeing a Hanukkah play at Hebrew school and being in production of *Peter Pan*, in which I played Mrs. Darling because I was the tallest. The grown up. And I tripped over my own skirt really spectacularly and fell, and everybody laughed. So then I did it again because I was a real show off!

SS Because you liked the laughter?

EL Yes!

SS That's great!

EL I would have been five or six.

SS Where did you go to school? Where was your Hebrew school?

EL My Hebrew school was in New York. It was Temple Emanuel Hebrew School.

You might guess by the fact that it was called "Emanuel" that it was really... well my dad used to call it an Episcopalian synagogue.

SS That's a theological joke that my atheist idiocy doesn't understand.

EL I'm really sorry. So Emanuel is a Christian name. Why was the synagogue called "Emanuel"? Because it was trying to pretend to be a church. The most deeply assimilated space I think I've ever been in. But they had a fun Hanukkah play and some of it is still in my head.

SS What is the form of a Hanukkah play? I've never seen a Hanukkah play.

EL I mean... there are Jewish holidays where it is traditional to put on plays, but Hanukkah actually isn't one of them. I think in the tradition of the Episcopalian synagogue, it was like a way of saying "you might have Christmas shows and stuff, but we have a Hanukkah show...! And it's about a potato..." Literally. It was about a potato that gets turned into a menorah.

SS Was it really about a potato?

EL Yeah, it really was. There was a song about a potato.

SS What were you like at school?

EL I was a huge nerd. Surprising no one who knows me. Yeah, I was a real weirdo. My early years of school were actually pretty nice, though. And I think it was because there was an acknowledgment that even though I was a weird nerd, I was the best at coming up with games. Fun games that were like world building games. And then we got a little bit older and imagining in public became very embarrassing. And games that already had rules, like dodgeball or whatever, became the games that everybody wanted to play. And then I fully moved into the nerd space at that time.

SS "Fully into the nerd space"... that could be quite a good album title.

Were you a writer at school?

El I guess I was, I was about to say no. But I think that's just the way I remember it. I think I probably was a writer at school. I wrote poetry at school, actually. And my mum really encouraged that. I sort of didn't want to think of myself as a writer in any way until I was in my mid-20s.

SS Your family had a background in the arts? The arts was something that was present in your home?

EL Totally. Yeah. Both of my parents work in the arts. And I also have an older brother who worked in the arts as well.

SS Can I ask what they did or do?

EL So my dad did a lot of different things in the music industry. But he always used to say that if you woke him up in the middle of the night and asked him what he did, he was a composer. And my mum is a painter.

SS Was it exciting to be surrounded by that creativity? Did it empower your nerd space?

EL It totally did. It massively empowered my nerd space. And it's actually funny because my mum is a real nerd and a weirdo. And my dad was weird in many ways but was also a really cool person and we don't understand how he has found himself with this array of nerds around him.

And also they hadn't necessarily had a lot of encouragement to be creative when they were growing up, so it was hugely important to them both that we were exposed to the arts, and that we were empowered to do our thing. Although they would also have opinions about when and where and how certain things should happen. They also wanted to try and parent us well, and not make us too much like weird, alien children, in terms of what we were making or how we were making it.

SS Do you like their stuff? Do you like your mum's art and your dad's music?

EL I do.

I think it's natural if you're in a family where more than one generation are artists to, in some ways, define yourself against the kinds of things that they make. For example, my little brother also is an opera singer, so the way he is a musician is very different from the way that my dad was a musician. And the role that music and visuals play in my work is different from the kinds of work that they make, but I do really like their work.

Something that was really sweet and really significant, I think, is that my mum always – even when I was really tiny – she always asked me what I thought of her work. And she would tell me, as well when I was like pretty young, eight or nine or something like that, she would say "oh, I like that. That's a good point" So she is an interesting role model, I think, as far as seeking feedback, because she will take feedback from fucking anyone. But she really knows what is the right thing and what's not the right thing. So being able to see her choose her response to that feedback – for example the difference between "oh, okay", rather than "oh! That's what it is!" Do you know what I mean? I think she has been a real role model in terms of how I conduct myself.

SS What kind of stuff were you reading or watching or thinking about that you discovered yourself? What was your imaginative terrain in your nerd space as a teenager?

EL As a teenager?

SS Yes! When you were in New York. Because you lived in New York until what age?

EL 18.

SS So while you were living in New York in your teen years, what kind of stuff were you engaging with?

EL Well, I was really into punk. Dressing appropriately crazy. And actually, I don't know if you realise this, but CBGB's – RIP – they let you in at 16. You can't get served at the bar, but they would let you in for gigs at 16.

SS So CBGB's for people who don't know was the heart of the New York punk scene from the mid-70s up to when? When did it close?

EL In the 2000s I think? I don't know, maybe later than that. I think it was in the 2000s.

SS And so did you go to CBGB's.

EL We went all the time! And also our friend's dad ran a poetry club directly across the street called the Bowery poetry club. And we used to go there.

SS I think I've heard of the Bowery poetry club. Is that not really celebrated?

EL Yeah it was.

SS That's like the coolest teenage life you could ever hope to have.

EL But you need to understand how deeply uncool I was while I was having it.

So I had blue hair for a long time. And I kind of keep always saying to myself – it was cobalt blue – I keep always saying to myself I'll go back to blue and I never quite have, but I would like to.

SS Who do you remember seeing at CBGB's? Did you have a favourite gig there?

EL Well this was not actually a *favourite* gig, but just in retrospect... we saw Joey Ramone there not super long before he passed. And it was kind of weird. We were the youngest people in the audience by like 40 years... But it was also really beautiful. Surprisingly lo-fi. The bathrooms were still totally disgusting. The second most disgusting bathrooms I've ever experienced in my life. And the most disgusting being the bathrooms in a borstal in Bulgaria that I made a show in a couple of years ago now. Which are bar-setting for *really disgusting*. It was derelict. It wasn't in action. It was a derelict former borstal. And I used to carry in a big thing of Dettol when I would use the toilets. Anyway, why are we talking about this?

SS Because it sets a context for the disgusting calibre of CBGB's, in which you saw Joey Ramone in his last months.

EL Literally he died very soon after. We thought he was just old, we did not know that he was dying.

SS What a thing to have seen though.

EL Yeah, I'm really glad we stopped. We almost couldn't be fucked. We almost just ate French fries instead.

SS Where did you go when you were 18?

EL When I was 18 I moved to the UK. I went to Cambridge University, which was *quite* the culture shock. Having chosen the downtown punk art scene in my teen years. But my parents were very proud and really excited. And then I had a really horrible time...

But that was very character building. And then I moved to London. And I've been in London or the southeast ever since.

SS What did you study at Cambridge?

EL I studied history. And I know this is something we have in common.

SS Yeah, I think it's been really fundamental to my thinking about the world.

EL Yeah, I think so too. I think for me as well.

SS Has it informed your writing, do you think?

EL A lot. I think on a few different levels. For one, I think that by studying history you're really invited to consider that human beings can behave in all sorts of different ways. And I also think that moving countries does that as well. All sorts of things that you grow up believing are obvious, or just how the world works, just how it always is – it becomes clear that they're total lies. So moving from the US to the UK will do that because both countries have a set of orthodoxies that overlap, but are also significantly different, and were especially in 2003 when I emigrated. I think they've converged a little bit now. But anyway. And I also think that's the case when you're studying history. You just realise that there are all kinds of ways of imagining the world in a much bigger and wildly different way than we normally give credence to.

And that is huge politically and huge creatively. And also, it's just completely interesting to study human behaviour, isn't it?

SS The shit that people do. We either imagine the shit that people do, or we read about the shit that people did. Either way, it's that investigation.

Do you remember any specific examples of that jarring sense of realising the things you thought were innate were actually culturally specific? From that moment of moving from New York to Cambridge? Were there specific things?

EL I would say the NHS was a big one. I sort of knew about it beforehand. But I think the understanding that "no, health care is just free" Everyone accepts this as normal. Healthcare is just free. Like, I actually had... this was years later, but I had my appendix out and I called my mum as it became clear that I was going to need to get my appendix out. And I said "don't worry about it, but this is what's going on", and my mom was like "do you have a credit card?" I was like, "I don't need a credit card Mama. It's free" And she was like, "even for you?" And I was like, "Yeah, it's free" And I'll never forget the silence at the end of that phone call.

SS That's really moving.

EL But there was tonnes and tonnes of stuff. And also stuff on the other side. For example, a friend of mine asked me if I had to herd cows as part of my morning routine. And I was like, "Yeah, I had to herd cows over the Brooklyn Bridge like it's really tough because there are a lot of cars as well"

SS What?! A friend in England asked that?

EL Yeah! A fucking Cambridge undergraduate!

SS Wow!

EL And then somebody else very slowly and painstakingly explained the existence of secondhand bookstores to me.

SS That's very generous! That's a very generous thing to do, right?

EL Important actually. Important to know about.

But it was very interesting because I had to work out whether these people are all insane, or was I insane? Do you know what I mean? Because they were so 100% sure – because American culture is so penetrating – they thought that they knew. And also because they were Cambridge undergrads... they thought that they knew...

And it was actually a formative and really useful, important experience to have people be really convinced of a reality that you know to be false. I feel like that has really impacted my writing ever since. I feel like, in a lot of ways, that's very often the situation I'm trying to dramatise.

SS I think that's a really brilliant self-analysis. I was just thinking that describes nearly every Eve Leigh play that I know. That bafflement at the insistence of other people's reality that you understand to be mythical or much more fragile than they perceive it to be. And that's really fascinating. Did you write at Cambridge?

EL Well, I wrote stand-up comedy, believe it or not.

SS Did you!

EL Yeah!

SS Did you perform it as well?!

EL Yeah...

SS Shit! That's amazing! How was that?

EL It was okay. It was okay. I did a few like Footlights smokers. And I was always one of only two girls. But I felt like my jokes were okay, but I didn't like performing. And that was actually the only creative writing I did. I did a lot of essay writing. But that was the only creative writing I did.

SS It's really interesting to me that when you were talking about writing as a teenager or writing as a child in New York, that you told yourself for a long time that you didn't write. When would you have told yourself that you started writing?

EL When I was 26.

SS Right, that's quite specific.

EL Yeah. Well, I think what it was is I ran out of excuses to not try to write a play. So I tried to write a play. And that was also the age that I got on to the Royal Court Young Writers Programme. I
literally wrote my first play because the programme had a deadline in five days. And I was feeling really depressed. And it was February, and I was like, "okay, so for these five days in February, I'm going to write a play and then I'm going to send it off. And then we'll see" And actually that play – which was called *Silent Planet* – is what got me on to the Young Writers Programme, and the person who admitted me to the young writers programme was Jude Christian.

SS Whoa! So the Stückemarkt creates its own circle!

EL That's true. And it was put on at the Finborough, so it was my first produced play as well.

SS I feel suddenly profoundly ignorant that that's a play that I don't know.

EL I don't think I sent it to you.

SS But can I just go back to that moment? Because that's quite a peculiar feeling for a 26-year-old to have. Most 26-year-olds don't feel compelled to write the play that they've been resisting all their lives. What was it that led you to do it? There must have been other experiences of theatre or something else to prompt you?

EL Yes, so I was trying to start a career as a director. And I had done some Assistant Stage Manager jobs and I'd done some Assisting Director jobs. I had directed a couple of fringe plays. And it just sucked. Being a young director totally sucks!

And two other things: one is that I don't see very well and I feel like I had too idiosyncratic a point of view to really engage with the practical ways that the visual language of staging and plays need to work. So I didn't really want to be responsible for that, even when I was responsible for it because I was the director.

And then, also, I think at the same time, I don't think it suits my ego to be a director. I think being a writer is much more suitable to my ego. I think I prefer to be the person who doesn't say very much in the back, but also holds all the cards. Do you know what I mean? I don't have to be the one who keeps everybody captivated.

I think some people have the egos of actors, and maybe that's what makes them actors. You know what I mean? They want to be looked at and they want to be applauded, and they want to play, and they want to make a mess. And some people like to be the puppet master. Not that that's what a director necessarily is. But we've

talked about this before. How being the writer is like being the rhythm section. It's the beat holding it all down, but it's not necessarily the place you look when you're watching. And I love that space, actually.

SS It's a really lovely analogy. We've talked as well about the ways our sight has affected our theatre and affected our writing. And I would completely say the reason I've never really directed is because of my vision. I think we've had competitions to see who has the worst vision, me or you. And I think we've both got strengths in that competition.

EL I agree, I agree. That's my perception.

SS So what was the Royal Court Young Writers Programme like?

EL It was really good. Well, I'll tell you what it was, it was really good. Leo is amazing. Leo Butler.

SS Leo Butler who ran the course.

EL A God among men.

And I would say everybody on the course was super talented. There was also a bit of a weird atmosphere, because it was not that long after *That Face* had blown up.

SS Polly Stenham's play.

EL So there was a bit of a reality show feel that Leo did everything in his power to diminish. But there was slightly a "who's going to be the next Polly Stenham?" vibe. Like, "whoever talks most in the room will be the next Polly Stenham" kind of atmosphere.

But there were lots of incredibly gifted writers, some of whom have continued in playwriting and others have moved on to other forms. For example, there is a really fantastic drag queen called Virgin Extravaganza, who was part of that group and was, and is an amazing writer. And John O'Donovan, the playwright, was also part of that group, and does wonderful work.

And those are the people who are popping into my head offhand. But I think there may be more.

SS By the time you've done that course... by the time you've written *Silent Planet* and that had had its life at Finborough, were you very confident that writing for theatre was the thing that you were going to do?

EL I'm still not confident about that man!

SS Me neither! I still think I'm gonna play for Man United eventually.

EL Eventually!

But something I learned from you actually is that playwriting is a practice. And that you can keep practising and keep making things. And that's really what I want to do. I really want to keep practising. And I really want to keep making things. But it's not an identity that you take on, you just continue your practice, and hopefully you get a bit better.

SS I was talking to Nia from Ta-Nia about this, in a conversation that some people will listen to after we've had this conversation – so they'll have a weird reversal of their own chronology – but just reminding myself that the point is the verb, not the noun; that it's about *writing* not being a *writer*. I think that has been really helpful to my working life.

So I want to talk about *Midnight Movie*, and we're here to talk about *Midnight Movie* in particular, but I want to speak about that period before if we can. It felt at the time that every time you sent me an email with a play, I'd be like "fuck! Eve smashed it again. She's on fire!" I've talked about that to other writers. I'll say there are some writers who work away for five or six years, and then suddenly they've cracked something and Eve Leigh is a writer who did that. So I've talked about you behind your back to beginner writers as a totem of encouragement. What was those years like for you? Because I imagine it's a frustrating time, as well as an investigative time?

EI Yeah, I think those are fair ways of describing it. But also, I would say that I was learning a lot during that time.
An important thing that I learned, and that you keep learning and learning actually but that I was starting from zero with pretty much, is how to be a collaborator. So I feel a lot of that time was spent frustrated in devising rooms. But also, the flip side of that is that I was also not being a good enough collaborator. And sometimes shutting my mouth in rehearsal rooms and bottling it, and not being a very good collaborator. Do you know what I mean? To know how to support other people's creative endeavours is essential if you're writing for performance. And I feel like, if I'm thinking about that time, that's one of the things that I was really learning and I didn't necessarily know I was learning.

And yes, I also felt like my work was good enough. And questioning why it wasn't happening for me? And it's easy to be patient in retrospect, but I wasn't necessarily patient at the time, you know?

SS I do. Yes. I know that feeling well.

Tell me about the starting point of *Midnight Movie*?

EL Well, the brilliant Louise Stevens – who is now the Artistic Director of Playwrights' Studio Scotland, but used to work at the Court as the Deputy Literary Manager – after *Spooky Action at a Distance* which you mentioned earlier, she said "we can't commission you, but we are going to send you to Cove Park" which is an amazing residency place in Scotland, "for two weeks, and we're just gonna pay you to do whatever you want there" And I was like "amazing. Okay"
So first of all, Cove Park is insanely beautiful. Partly because it's really near Trident so people aren't allowed to develop the land around there. So it's very wooded, because it's all owned by the Ministry of Defence.
We would watch the nuclear submarines go in and out of the lock...!

SS Wow. That's amazing!

EL Yes, it really is amazing. Everybody go to Cove Park if you can.

SS People in Germany listening to this might not know but Trident is the UK's nuclear submarine, which is based in Scotland. Yeah. And you were in this most beautiful place watching the nuclear submarine being submerged... that sounds like an Eve Leigh play in itself!

EL Exactly!

So I was like "Okay, I'm just going to do whatever my body wants to do. If I want to sleep, I'm going to sleep. If I want to eat, I'm going to eat. If I want to walk or write or anything" And basically, I stayed up all night writing this really weird 12 pages of something, and I sent it to Louise and she said "this is far too weird... But there's an energy to it, and I hope you develop it, but we can't develop it here" And that continues an experience I've had with every play that I've had produced, where they have all previously been rejected by one of the partners who've ultimately produced them.

SS That's rather an encouraging tale in itself. That the theatre that rejects your play will eventually produce it, they just don't know it yet!

EL I would not encourage people to believe that... but it is consistent with my experience. And there are also some things that haven't been announced yet where that is the case as well.

SS That's really lovely.

EL So yeah, I was watching the nuclear submarines and also a fog come down from the lock, and also still fucking awake and in pain, and actually far away from the internet, because internet use is very restricted at Cove Park, and the idea came out.

And then I sent it to Matt Maltby, who's now producer at Paines Plough, but was then a freelance producer, and he was like, "let's do it. Let's make it happen" And he wrote the grant applications.

I really think it would have just gone into the drawer, like a lot of other things that I think are good, if it wasn't for Matt Maltby and the funding and development that he was able to get. So then I sent it to Rachel Bagshot and Rachel was really key in dramaturging it, and so was Matilda Ibini. Actually some of the original ideas had come from conversations with Matilda anyway.

SS And Rachel directed the production eventually at the Royal Court.

EL Yes.

SS And Matilda was?

EL The dramaturg.

SS Were you sending Rachel and Matt and Matilda, those 10 pages of unconscious splurge that you sent to Louise? Or had you worked on it?

EL No, it was still those.

SS I think I've read those? In my memory I've read those. And I remember thinking they were really cool. And they've got their presence still in the play now. The tone of the play feels as though it comes from that same exploration.

EL Yeah, I think so.

SS So what was the development process? What did you do with Rachel? Or with Matilda?

EL Well, so Rachel really wanted the play to be itself. She really understood what the play was, even if she didn't necessarily know it beat by beat. She couldn't have written an essay on it, do you know what I mean? But she could smell what the play was. And she really wanted it to be itself.

SS Could you smell what it was? How aware of its identity were you?

EL A little bit. I don't know. I could smell what it *wasn't*, maybe? But I couldn't necessarily smell what it *was*.

And Matilda as well. I felt like Rachel was saying "I really enjoy how far out this piece of text is. I'm not scared. I'm thrilled by it. I want it to be more itself" And Matilda was

also happy with the way in which it was formally unusual in the British theatre landscape, but she is also an amazing pop storyteller. I mean, she's also, like, fully from space. But in that way that when someone is fully from space, there's a degree of phenomenal, weird, inexplicable influences, but also space stories are really classic stories of discovery. Quest narratives and stuff. And the kinds of storytelling that you have in video games. They're really deep in her DNA as an artist, and I felt like those two influences are really legible in the play. And I also feel that both of them are maybe part of me and part of the text as well.

SS So you developed the play in workshop with Matilda and Rachel?

EL But also I wrote some more stuff and sent it to them and they told me their thoughts. And then we had an in-person R&D with what turned out to be the original cast, which is Tom Penn and Nadia Nadarajah.

SS What did they bring to it?

EL Well, I think Nadia's sense of Deaf horror was really important. Nadia is Deaf, and is very culturally, capital D Deaf as we say in the UK when we're talking about Deaf people. She has a political Deaf identity as well as being Deaf. And her perspective on Deaf horror, and visual horror was really important in terms of the storytelling.

And so Tom, as you know, is also my husband, although we weren't married at that point. And he just like got the text in a way that was pretty extraordinary. He just read it very clearly from the jump. And he's used to devising processes so I wasn't sure quite what he would do with a big chunk of weird text but he made it very clear and understandable from the start. Maybe because he's fucking used to me wittering on at him?

And then, because Tom is also a professional drummer and singer. We were like "how about... can we find a drum set, and the assistant director *could* find a drum set" And then when we saw Nadia signing and Tom speaking and drumming, that was a really big moment of crystallisation, I think. And we saw also what he was doing physically beyond the drum set and that was suddenly the extra energy that the text needed in the room. And it feels significant that the director for the Stückemarkt is including a deaf woman and a drummer. I think that's kind of an interesting coincidence.

SS I mean, what was it like at the Royal Court? What was it like playing it at the Royal Court?

EL It was amazing. There are not that many people who can really confidently note a text like that. Vicky Featherston is one of them. And Jane Fallowfield is one of them. And Lucy Morrison is one of them. And they were all really key in making sure

that the text communicated itself, which I am incredibly grateful for. I mean, there are no words.

And yeah, in my experience, it's a really nice building. It's a building full of nice people who are really committed to doing cool stuff. Yeah, it was a total pleasure to work there.

SS Nice to return to the place where you'd done the group.

EL Yes. I took a photo of my discount card for the bar into the room where we were rehearsing, which was also the room where I'd done the group. Yeah, I treasure that.

SS One of the things I most admire about your theatrical work – and there's many things – is your commitment to making theatre accessible. Can you tell me about that? Tell me how integral that is in your thinking? Am I right in arguing that it's integral not just to the conditions of your work, but to the work itself?

EL I really wouldn't want to position myself as knowing stuff that I don't know, or having a more advanced access practice than I actually do. Because I'm really trying to learn and like part of why one is constantly learning in this regard is that human bodies are just so diverse, and their needs are so varied. And that's part of the incredible creativity that is unlocked when you admit a wider range of bodies into the room. But also that means that I don't necessarily know anything about anything.

But something that I want to make a precondition of in my work forever, is to always have captions. And the reason for that is that the play as it's performed is never exactly as it is in the captions. And what that means is when you see the space, it's actually liveness made visible. You understand what theatre is in a different way. And making that conflict visible between the idea of the thing, and the actual thing present on stage, is deeply exciting to me. And I think maybe captions have become a symbol of what a lot of access work is at the moment? Maybe I'm being unfair but I feel like there's a lot of "oh, we need to do it, don't we? Oh, but it's so expensive. Oh, but the little disableds, you know, we need to include them, don't we really?" And it's like, no, these are actually radical formal gestures as well, that you're failing to consider. And these are important. Certain things about the philosophy of theatre become tangible in a different way, which again, for German listeners, the idea that actors might respond to something that's going on in the audience is not that fresh of an idea. And it's not super fresh in the UK either. It's been happening for quite a long time. But at the same time, in the new writing tradition, there's often times actors don't really feel empowered to respond if something unexpected happens. And if you're like "this space is for people with unpredictable bodies, this space is for the live and unexpected things happening", everything changes. So much dumb, repressive energy is unlocked and reveals itself as something totally different and really exciting.

SS It's really inspiring.

Travels been important to you, for so much of your work. I mean, one of the sadnesses of the virtual Stückemarkt is that we can't go to Berlin together. The idea of hanging out with all of the artists I've met this week, together around the fire pit at the Theatretreffen in the Berliner Festspiele is such an exciting idea.

EL We need to make it happen in 2022.

SS Are you aware that travel is something integral to your work? And by travel, I mean not just the physical process of travel, but the process of being dislocated or displaced, being an immigrant or an emigre? Would you agree that that's something that percolates through a lot of your work?

EL Definitely. And also the sense of speaking a different English in some way. Certainly to English people. I feel like I didn't necessarily understand until I was older that the English that I grew up speaking in New York was a different English. Certainly the English in my home was heavily inflected with Yiddish. And that's actually something I've had to make a conscious effort to do in my relationship, is use the Yiddish words, rather than thinking in Yiddish and then translating. And I want him to learn the Yiddish. I don't want to be translating in that context. So I do that. And he's a good learner.

SS That's really lovely.

EL But yes, I think there's the sense somehow of being between languages or having a secret language. There's a weird running joke in my family about people pretending not to speak languages that they actually do. One granddad pretended not to speak Yiddish when he did. One grandmother on the other side pretended not to speak English, but when she wanted to speak English, she devastatingly did!

So I identify strongly with that feeling of "there's a word for this. But it doesn't belong to this place it belongs to somewhere else" And also the feeling of, and this comes from Yiddish, "if we put this into words it is dangerous" Like the impulse to do something anti-jinx-y really quickly if you should ever say anything about the future. We need to be really careful what we say because on the one hand, we might make it happen, and on the other hand, we might ensure that it never happens by speaking. So I think that position that language occupies is hugely impactful in my work.

SS That's really compelling. It's really interesting that – because you're the fifth of the artists I've spoken to this week, regardless of what order these podcasts go out in, or rather the sixth because Ta-Nia are a duo – in all of the pieces there is an investigation of the impossibility and necessity of precision in language. The impossibility of ever finding the right word, and the need to find the right word, and that paradoxical agony seems to define all five of the pieces. Somebody one day will

write a thesis about what's happening with that, but it seems to be something that's happening with artists at the beginning of their working lives in 2021.

EL We're obviously in a time of enormous economic, political and ecological transition. And I feel like the official culture in the UK, the US and Canada where we all come from, or are part of the cultures there, is still forged by people who thought the Iraq War was a good idea. They are still the dominant political class. And there's been no real reckoning with that, or with the economic collapse in 2008. Or with the obvious and terrifying ecological collapse that we're currently experiencing. And I feel like this is because there isn't a linguistic or an ideological framework for that to exist in the mainstream culture. Everyone's strategy for dealing with all this stuff is to simply pretend that it isn't happening. Not everyone, but official culture in all of these places. And I wonder if we are trying to find a language that's suitable for the times, and if there's something dramatically interesting about watching the effort and failure in that context?

SS That's really beautiful.

I'm going to steal that from you and pretend that was my idea!

Not really...

Tell me about your working day. Have you got an average working day?

EL Well, it's funny because you massively shamed me when I said that my average working day started at 11 a few months ago!

SS Did I? I think my standard at the moment is 11. That's terrible isn't it?

El Unless... Well, actually, no... I think maybe I said I got up at 11...

SS Oh getting up at 11 is different!
EL And you didn't "massively shame me"... you were just like... really?

Look at us, two aging punks quibbling over getting up at 11 or just getting to your desk at 11.

So yeah, I've been getting up whenever my cat gets me up to feed him. Around seven or eight, and then considering going back to sleep and instead doing my chants. Doing my Buddhisms. And then eating and probably being at work. Now this feels very loaded, but in the last couple of weeks I've I've had commitments where I have to be at my desk at 10am, and that's enjoyable.

SS And when you're there are you just writing? What else apart from your chanting is part of your working process?

EL Twitter... it's disgusting, but it's true. I feel like my brain is like popping candy, and different things need to pop at different times. So I kind of need to have stuff happening on parallel channels at the same time in order to make work. Like, I need to pause for five minutes and then come back to the thing, but during that five minutes I'll maybe scroll on Twitter or be on the internet anyway.

There is a baby living in my house. It's not my baby. But I really love that baby. Sometimes the baby is part of my working day.

I like drawing and listening to music. I like dancing around my room to music or lying down on the floor and looking up and listening to music. And I like drawing really terrible drawings in my little book, and I feel like those are important. Again, ways of working on multiple channels at the same time.

SS How's the pandemic been for you as an artist? Not necessarily as a human, but as an artist? Or is it too soon to tell?

EL I think it's probably too soon to tell. But I have been working a lot, which I've been incredibly grateful for. I've been very booked. Like, I've written for games a lot as well and that feeds into my practice as a playwright. So people are like "oh, somebody who's really interested in the digital world and writes for games as well as for theatre, let's hire her" which has been amazing. But also, as a friend said, it feels like work has just crashed through the walls. And that's kind of how I felt as well. But I think there are beneficial aspects to that.

SS Crashed through the walls in terms of it, It's just stopped?

EL No, as in, work is now inside my house. Sitting on my chest while I go to sleep. The way I pictured it when he said that was that the walls had turned to ocean water and just fell in. So you thought you were at home, but actually you're drowning in work.

SS I think that's an experience that an awful lot of people will relate to, not just people working in the arts. This whole culture of people working from home and finding that more attractive, I worry that all of a sudden we will realise that work is corrupting our home lives. But I don't want to end with a bleak thing!
I'm interested in what your perception is of the years to come for you as a writer? For theatre in general? How are you feeling about coming out of the pandemic? And what that offers you as a theatre maker?

EL I feel like we are at something of a crossroads.

I think that something I have been thinking for a while is that it's possible that we're in a golden age. And that's a bit scary because our age is so imperfect. But I mean

creatively. British arts, European arts might be in a golden age and I'm worried about that ending. That the period of state subsidy could potentially end. But I also feel there has been so much injustice and violence that has been part of that age, and I wonder... I don't know... I have a lot of faith in people. I think it's possible that all of these cataclysms that are in progress are inviting us to build different and more inspired structures of being together.

I feel like a lot of the time, it's much easier to anticipate what you will lose than it is to anticipate what you'll gain once those things are no longer there.

And that's what I'm trying to think to myself. Try not to worry about the stuff that may be lost. Try and think about the new ways of being together that have yet to be uncovered. And I think that's one of the things keeping me going.

SS That's really beautiful. Thank you, Eve Leigh. Thank you very, very much indeed.

EL Thank you very much Simon Stevens and Anoushka and Emily.

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.