SHOTPUT.

The Shotput Podcast
'Making film v making theatre w/ Adura Onashile'
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Hello and welcome to the Shotput podcast. I'm Jim Manganello, one of the artistic directors of Shotput, a dance theatre company based in Glasgow. In this podcast, we have conversations with people from different practices, different to our own practice of dance and theatre. We investigate some ideas that are feeding us and our work at the moment, and that are informing the content of our shows. We hope that this allows you to walk with us for a while, to look at some interesting things, or at least things that are interesting to us; we hope they're interesting to you as well.

This first mini-series is all about film and it's being released in tandem with the Scottish tour of Shotput's live show Ferguson and Barton, which is touring now until the 15th of October 2022. Ferguson and Barton was inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece Vertigo, and the show itself is kind of about how movies affect our dreams and our realities. So, we wanted to speak to people who make film as part of our own research and as a way for audiences like you to approach the live work differently. Of course, we really hope you come to the live show, but even if you don't, these conversations are a way to bring you closer to how Shotput works, and the people that we work with.

Adura Onashile is our guest on this episode, which is, I'm sad to say, the final episode in this mini-series. Lucy Ireland, Shotput's other artistic director, and myself sat down with Adura at her flat in Glasgow, and we had a great discussion about filmmaking, the practicalities and tools that she uses are a filmmaker. We also talked about the white gaze, about Adura's multi-form practice, including her dancing career, which we firmly hope will be resurrected one day. And about playing murderous mothers. I hope you find Adura as wonderful and brilliant as we do.

A little bit about Adura. Adura is an actor, writer, and filmmaker. She's been making her own work since graduating from the now closed Dartington College of Arts. She became known to audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe through two very successful shows: 2013's solo show HeLa was inspired by the life of Henrietta Lacks, a black woman whose cells were taken without her consent at Johns Hopkins Hospital, and those cells became a huge source of medical research. Then in 2016, Adura's play Expensive Shit was staged at the Traverse Theatre also during the Fringe. Adura later turned Expensive Shit into a short film which premiered at the BFI London Film Festival in 2020 and has since been shown at festivals around the world. Since then, Adura has been working in film, particularly on a feature film, Girl, which is currently in post-production. Recently, Adura returned to the stage in the National Theatre of Scotland production of Medea at the Edinburgh International Festival in the 2022 edition. Adura's performance – I don't think this is a controversial thing to say – was one of the most memorable performances of any character that I've seen on stage. She is an artist who is muscular, smart, and funny, and it was so good to catch up with her, I hope you enjoy the conversation. Two quick things before we start: first, we had some audio difficulties in the recording of this podcast, by which I mean that I allowed the battery to die on the recorder that Lucy and I were using, so while Adura should come through loud and clear, you'll be

hearing Lucy and me on an iPhone backup recording that Lucy very brilliantly thought we should take. Apologies if that's annoying. Second, we start our conversation with some fairly detailed chat about Expensive Shit, the film version, so for a little bit of context, in the play and in the screenplay Adura was riffing off an actual situation that happened at the Shimmy Club in Glasgow. In 2013, it was discovered that a two-way mirror had been installed in the women's toilet and that male patrons could pay for access to view unsuspecting women from the other side of the mirror, which is a grim but suitable beginning for this conversation, given that Hitchcock's film and Ferguson and Barton the live show are interested in bringing out the sinners in us. More information on the tour of Ferguson and Barton at the end, for now, please enjoy the brilliance of Adura Onashile.

Jim (J):
There was a moment that took us by surprise in the film, and probably that's because we've started getting really interested in sound design. The film mostly takes place in the toilet of a nightclub, and the very moment when you would expect things to get the loudest – when she leaves the toilet and walks into the centre of the club – the sound bottoms out, which I thought was really effective and a really interesting choice. And so I'm wondering how you arrived at that choice, and I guess more broadly also how you collaborate with the composer – is it Re Ounuga?

Adura (A):
Yeah, Re Olunuga.

J:
And the sound designer William Aikman.

A:
It's so funny because I'm working with them on the feature as well, so they feel like real collaborators now because they did Expensive Shit and then we continued. I think for me it had to do with the dance floor being this space that Tolu, the main character, never had access to and has never been in whilst it's alive through the night, she's always in the toilet. It's a space that is not accessible to her, on so many levels, in terms of freedoms, in terms of choice, in terms of comfortability, it's just not a space she exists in during the hours of the nightclub. And then on this night she crosses the threshold because obviously she's drugged someone and she feels responsible and she wants to know what is happening so she crosses this space. And we talked a lot about it being before she enters it it's sort of like a heavenly space in her mind. It's like if she ever had access to the nightclub dance floor she would never need to work in the toilets anymore, so the space represents freedom for her. So, we started talking about it as the heaven space for her in some sense, with the toilets being hell, in her mind. But that actually when she gets there, she still isn't afforded any access to the space because of all the trauma she's in and the fear she's in which is why the sound… we thought about the sound, the space that she's longed for and has represented all this stuff for her, when she actually gets into it she has no access to the most important part of it which is music and sound, if you like. And that was what it was. And also the loss of sound is a trauma response as well. Those three things were the reasons we took the sound out.

J:
I think part of the reason why I'm curious about stuff like this is because I think as a theatre maker sometimes I feel like film envy. I guess I'm curious, how do you have those conversations with Re and William?

A:
It’s interesting, because that was my first instinct, “let’s get rid of the sound”, but before we settled on that we scored something for her. We scored a heaven-scape. So we always knew it wasn't going to be the sound of the nightclub. And then they were like “maybe we can explore her longing for that space in the score”, and of course as soon as you do that you lose all the other layers that are possible because you’re just painting it as a heaven space and nothing else. Whereas when the sound goes out, I think something weird happens to us where we know the sound we’re losing because we’re seeing the nightclub, so we know what it should sound like, and we’re also aware of how the character is experiencing this nothing sound, and I think those layers are lost when we scored it, so we went back to the original idea.

J:
That’s interesting.

A:
But the conversation was you have to try it sometimes before you can let it go. When you first say it to people, they’re like “but why would you do that?” I think Re was saying “it’s such a pivotal moment in the film, we should have something orchestral almost”, of course that makes sense, and then we tried and we were like “uh, no. Absolutely not.” It wasn't needed.

Lucy (L):
How did you come to decide the music that you did use? Because normally when you hear club music you want to dance, right?

A:
Yeah.

L:
But definitely I didn’t get that feeling.

A:
It’s so funny, when you’re in a nightclub – and I don’t know how we came up with this – what you’re hearing is beats but also the sounds of people reacting to the beat. There’s a constant “utz-utz-utz” in the background but actually what’s more interesting to me is that it’s peppered with the highs and lows of when the beat drops and the crowd goes “whaaa!” and then comes back down again. I was always concerned that people couldn’t really hear that, because that felt really important to me that there was this other world that was happening at the same time. Is that the question you asked me? I can’t remember, I’ve just gone off on a tangent. What did you just ask me?

L:
I just asked because the music in it didn’t make me feel like I wanted to dance.

A:
Yes, so I wonder whether part of that is because it’s quite joyous, even on a subliminal level, and that is completely at odds with what you’re seeing in the toilets, so you’re not attracted to that space, maybe your ear or your feeling isn't attracted to that space on the dance floor where it

should be because William peppered it all with the sounds of people's roars and laughter, it's very minimal but it's there. I think maybe that has something to do with it.

J:
No, I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but the whole thing is slightly off-putting. More than slightly off-putting, I felt uncomfortable.

L:
Yeah, you feel like you're on the edge of your seat, like you're just waiting, "what's going to happen?"

A:
It's so funny, isn't it? Because I wasn't really particularly aware that I was trying to write or that I was trying to make a thriller, because that's what people have said about it, it feels very thriller-esque, and I think that's a bit of a shame because if I knew that was what I was trying to make maybe I'd have made different choices in the edit and really pushed into that a bit more. I don't know, the film is the film and it's fine and I'm happy with it, but I didn't think I was making a suspense thing, I really was just focusing on the lead character and her journey through the night as opposed to what the audience is understanding or not really understanding about the story.

J:
This is one of the things that has come up now in this is the third interview we're doing, every single interview, the role of genre and how it feels like one of the potential differences between theatre and film is film audiences when they see a film almost always expect a genre. Like in theatre we kind of slosh around between comedy and tragedy quite easily. So, for listeners that don't know, Expensive Shit started as a… did it start at the Fringe?

A:
Yeah, as a play.

J:
Do you want to talk a little bit about the journey? Because maybe that will contextualise some of the questions.

A:
Yes. Basically, Expensive Shit was a play, it wasn't a particularly successful play but what it was, it didn't really take the format of a three structure play, and I think that's because I was trying to do lots of things in one play because I was like "nobody's ever going to give me the chance to do this again so I'm just going to do everything I want to do. I'm going to put dance in there, everything I want to do in one play." So, Expensive Shit was set in a nightclub in Glasgow, and the lead character was a woman called Tolu who was in her late thirties, and it was set now, the present day, 2013 or '14. And then in her youth in Lagos as part of Fela Kuti's Shrine as one of the dancers in his Shrine. And the story kind of flitted between Glasgow now and Lagos then. And the Glasgow club was based on the story of the Shimmy Club where there was a two-way mirror in the ladies' toilets and women were not aware of the two-way mirror, and male punters could go into a kind of champagne room that they paid quite a lot of money for and sat and drink champagne and watched the women's toilets. And there was a feeling in some of the reading we did and research we did that there was some sort of targeting of some women after watching them in the toilet, so I wanted to tell that story but from the point of view of a toilet attendant who knows about the

two-way mirror and sort of manipulates the behaviour of the women who come into the toilet for the titillation of the men on the other side, after having had this background of being one of Fela Kuti's dancers. And I was always interested in how the dancers in his compound, The Shrine, were often unpaid, the younger ones of them anyway, and had dreams of becoming dancers in his main band. And I think there were correlations between her coming from that background and never quite succeeding in what she wanted and then finding herself in another situation where she was being complicit again in what can only be called the exploitation of women. So, she had been exploited as a woman when she was younger and then she was doing the same. And I suppose the story is the arc of how she decides to change things by the end of her time in the Glasgow space.

L:
What was the journey between the theatre version to the film?

A:
The play is very different to the film, and I'm glad it is in a way. But the journey was a couple of film producers came to see the play – and I say that it wasn't a successful play because that actually ties into why they saw a film in it – the play often didn't explain where you were going or why you were going there, it was literally the same set, characters would turn around and you'd be in a completely different time and space, and it did that back and forth through the whole hour and ten minutes. [LAUGHS] And I think part of the shock of it was there was no explanation, you just had to kind of figure it out by yourself, and I think the producers of film kind of lends itself to that a bit more, just visual storytelling, basically, without explaining where you are. Anyway, these producers came to see the play and were like "we think you could write for film because it feels very visual." So, the thing that became really apparent with the short film, it's only thirteen minutes long, you can only be in one space, so Lagos was out of the question, so we knew then that everything had to be based in Glasgow in the nightclub. We knew that we only really had the three spaces of the nightclub, but really the toilet, so again that meant that all the action mostly had to be in the toilet. And then I struggled really hard with the fact that in the play she doesn't drug anybody, she's asked to but doesn't and has this moment of emancipation, and in the film obviously she does. And it was one of those things where I was going along going "no, she doesn't drug them, she gets out of it and doesn't do it. How does she get out of it? Why does she get out of it?" Because obviously in the past, in the play, she could keep referencing back to her past and what she didn't do then in order to make her help the woman in the present. That's how the play worked. But there was none of that in the film, there was just this character in this very F-ed up situation, and it just became really apparent that she had no agency to not give the water.

J:
The water where the drugs are.

A:
The water where the drugs are, to drug the punter. And it just became really apparent that I needed to take her there. And it was a difficult moment, but once it got there, I was like "oh, god, absolutely." But I still tried to emancipate her by her breaking the mirror right at the end of the film.

J:
There's three things that I really want to pick up on in that. One is this idea of visual storytelling and the way that film can do that in a way that theatre… okay, of course we do, but not like that.

A:
No.

J:
Did you find that liberating? Like particularly with the two-sided mirror, that is such a visual…

A:
Yeah, yeah.

J:
I mean, it's a gift as a visual metaphor. Maybe metaphor is not the right word, but just device. Was that liberating, that you didn't have to explain things?

A:
In the theatre show?

J:
In the film.

A:
Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I think actually that is what I was trying… that sense of suspense and not knowing, was what I was trying to get in the play. And I loved it. And my dramaturg all through was like "Adura, you've got to give the audience something at some point." [LAUGHTER] But I love that, I love just teasing, like "what is this? What is it?" I was able to do that in a much more liberated way in the film. Just the beauty of all the little clues that are dropped, an audience might or might not pick up on them. But, yeah, I found that really liberating.

J:
There's a really interesting… I might have to explain a little bit here, but for us, a really interesting parallel between Tolu and the character in the film that Ferguson and Barton is based on, which is Vertigo, because Judy, the character in that movie, is an accomplice to a crime that men really are the mastermind of. And in some ways she's a kind of pawn who doesn't have agency, but in other ways the moral choice – she does choose to engage for whatever reason, and those reasons might be really good or really compelling. But it was really interesting for us to see that parallel. And it got me thinking, it seems to me that audiences are obsessed with the character who does participate in a crime but who isn't the mastermind of the crime, do you have any thoughts, why are we interested in that character?

A:
This is a big one, and I might be overstating it, and maybe Expensive Shit the film wasn't doing this, but I think morals are either good or bad, everything is binary in our world, everything. And I think we all know that's true. And we all live the reality that that's not true, but we have this facade of everything being binary. And I think when you work with characters that have contradictory truths at the same time, there's something quite liberating about that because we're seeing what we know to be true which is that you can hold loads of truths in yourself even though we're taught to be good or bad and there's good acts and bad acts, but actually it's all a bit of a mish-mash. And I think characters like Tolu offer that in some way, offer the complexity of "oh, god, you're the victim and the oppressor at the same time."

J:
It's so interesting. This binary thing, I personally feel like we're getting more like that as a society rather than less like that. We criticise the Victorians for being really moralistic and black and white, I think we're kind of found a new Victorianism where we all want to be pure, like virtue is so… being good and virtuous feels like it's very high on the list of a lot of people's priorities, and for me it was really refreshing to be with that character, and I think film has the power to invite us to imagine ourselves into that character in a way that we don't often do that.

A:
Yeah. I don't want to overstate it, because I think to a certain extent I get angry with film for the redemptive nature of a lot of… Expensive Shit fell into this as well, as in the breaking of the mirrors, redemptive to a certain extent. It's kind of saying "I did this really bad thing but I'm not going to let it continue." Slightly redemptive in my mind. And I get a bit frustrated by that a little bit, and I'm doing it in my feature as well, and I think it's about Execs and it's about story and it's about what will get funded, and it's about what they think audiences want, and all this kind of stuff. There always has to be a sense that there's a redemption, that the character is redeemed in some way. And I struggle with that.

J:
That is so interesting. Do people say that to you explicitly?

A:
Yeah, absolutely. Like "where's she going? What's the point?" There's still that 'once upon a time', still the moral of the story still embedded in our storytelling. What are we supposed to learn from this? What to do and what not to do, they still hold on that. And I fall into it too, but I do want to question it as well. I think it's about being kind, especially when you write about women, there's something about I want to make complicated women understood. "Do you understand her now? Great, the film's over." You know what I mean? And if we had real equality, I don't think I'd give a shit about it.

L:
Talking about theatre and film, how is the collaborative process different in both? Now that you're making a feature film I'm sure that's even different from the short film to the feature film.

A:
Let me just back, I've just been an actor in a piece of theatre, and I swear I just think our desire in theatre to get on with each other used to really irk me, and now I'm like "it's the best thing in the world." We will lie in theatre to pretend we're getting on because we understand that there's an equilibrium we have to have in the room in order to give the art space to exist. We understand that if communication breaks down or there's tension it can sometimes be detrimental to the work that you're doing. My experience of film is there's more of a kind of separation in people's heads between the responsibility of how we communicate right now and what ends up on screen. I think there's a massive gap. People don't think that me being rude to you right now is going to have anything to do with the film we make, and I would say that that is a shame because I actually think it does in some way. I think filmmaking, it's the same humans making film that are making theatre, and we are still as complex and in need of understanding and communication, whether it's film or theatre. But I think theatre takes responsibility for that a lot more than my experience of film has. There's, for example, a cinematographer that is just interested in the tricks, just interested in the technicality of picture, and I as a director am like "no, but I need to understand your mind as well,

it’s not just what ends up on screen, it’s actually our process towards what ends up on screen.” I think I probably bring that to the table because I come from theatre.

J:
Do you want to talk a little bit about your journey, like way before.

A:
Way back when? Yeah.

J:
Because we haven't really touched on it.

A:
I went to a place called Dartington that no longer exists, it was an experimental theatre course, which basically meant that we were governed by people like Grotowski to… we didn’t do Chekov or Shakespeare, we did more I guess what you would call performance art now, and that was the training I got for three years, and I think probably what it taught me more than anything is just to take risks and anything goes. And actually the performance you end up with isn't the most important thing, it’s your growth as an artist and your exploration. Process, essentially, is more important than the final piece. And I think that’s probably stayed with me to a certain extend. But when I came out of uni, there was nobody funding work like that, certainly I found that a lot of the companies were very white, and I just never got in there. And it’s really interesting to look back at that because right across the board all the companies like Forced Entertainment, like Desperate Optimists, they were all very white companies doing that kind of work, and I didn’t really have an understanding of it then, it’s now I look back and go “god, yeah, they were just all…” Yeah, and I think we weren’t used to seeing black bodies inhabiting that space. And so I tried for about two or three years to get work with companies like this and I wasn't getting anywhere, and then started my own company, a dance company, and it was my way of marrying my work at Dartington with my understanding of folk dance, like African dance and Brazilian dance and that kind of stuff. We worked for about two years in this company, and then I went to drama school afterwards because I just couldn’t get funding to the next level. And again I look back and go “oh, if only you had realised that just because you don’t get funding doesn’t mean the work is no good.” You know what I mean? Like then I just really thought “well, they haven't funded us, we must not be very good.” And I went to drama school after that for a year, and that’s the first time I studied the Chekovs and Shakespeares and the technique of acting. And I didn’t get on with it very well. [LAUGHS] But I came out, my god, and started doing like bit parts. But always in my heart I knew I wanted to make my own work. I knew that I still needed to speak to that training in Dartington. And, yeah, I wrote myself a one-woman show, then wrote Expensive Shit, and I’ve kind of moved away now into film, but I haven't moved away – I’ve dabbled in film, I don’t want to move away.

J:
You don’t.

A:
No.

L:
What brought you to Scotland?

A:
Roadkill. I did a play called Roadkill. I was an actor in a play called Roadkill, and we came up to do a development for four weeks, and then we were going to have a preview at the Tron and then there was a break of six weeks and then we were going to do the Fringe, and I stayed for the six weeks, got a job in a bar. And then we did Edinburgh, and I had no idea I wanted to leave London, but by the end of it, by the end of that whole summer – six months in total, I think – I was like "okay, I'm moving", and that was that. I think there's something in the air in Glasgow, though.

L:
Yeah. Well, a lot of makers live in Glasgow. It's like that kind of vibe.

A:
Yeah, I think there definitely is spiritually some lay-lines in this place to do with people feeling like it's a place where they can express themselves on whatever level. And I think there are very practical reasons that's true too, it's a small arts community, you have access to artistic directors who have access to dramaturgs and stuff like that, but I also think spiritually there's something about sometimes the easy way different art forms can cross over. You can be a writer, you can be a director, you can be an actor, you can be a maker. And there seems to be some room for that in Scotland to hold all those things in a way that maybe I didn't feel in England as much. People maybe wanted to define you more.

J:
It's interesting, and I feel this is not unrelated to the Glasgow chat, you said that a lot of culture has been produced for the white gaze, and I think you can feel that in Scotland. And I'm coming from a different place, I grew up in Detroit which is, when I was a child, 90% black, so culture was produced in a totally different way, although a lot of the culture, more than 10%, was produced for the white gaze, if you know what I mean. Anyway, I guess the point I'm getting at is how do you address that in the work that you're making?

A:
I think one of the things I ask myself is who is the work for? If my aunt, who is a sixty-five year old black woman, watched this film, would she feel like it was accessible to her? Would she feel like she understood the characters and they felt authentic? Because I think when I'm writing or making for her, I don't have to explain anything, and that's really probably a very simplistic yardstick but she's sort of lurking in the back of my head. Also because she has no interest in theatre whatsoever and in filmmaking, but I think when she sees something she understands then it means that I'm successful and that I'm not explaining. Because of the way we structure stories in the West, there will always be some sort of explaining, that's what we do. I think until you get into the visual arts realm where it feels like you can be a bit more free in narrative structure, I think in terms of theatre and film, we're pretty much stuck in the three act structure sort of thing, aren't we? The intro, the conflict, the resolution. And I think my work will probably always fall into that boundary, which is very Western, but within that I think authenticity of character is really important to me. So, the question was how have I come to a resolution about the white gaze? I don't think you can ever be free of it. I've been brought up in this culture and I've been trained in this culture, and my life's work will probably be about how to dismantle it, but I don't think I'll ever totally be successful at that, but that's my life's work in whatever medium I end up working in, little by little I'm just trying to challenge myself to tell stories differently to how I've been told they need to be told, which is about the white gaze, I think. Does that make sense?

J:
Yeah, it does.

A:
Maybe when I'm my final piece, I'll be like "oh, I've scratched the surface a bit." But it's so interesting, Ghosts for me was probably the most political work I've made, and it's probably the least successful critically, if you like, and I think there is a connection there.

J:
Ghosts was… well, in the form that I saw it in, it was an audio piece.

A:
Yeah.

J:
For example, I had my iPhone and I walked around Merchant City.

L:
How did that project come about?

A:
Yeah, I know, right? Mad. For fuck's sake. I spent so many times on that project going "what the fuck am I doing? I know nothing about AR, I don't like technology, I can hardly manage my phone, and here I am." And there's a really good joke… it's not a joke, but basically, on our first prototype viewing walk, my phone did not have the right operating system to run my show. That's how incongruous… I was like "but it's not working!" And I was like "oh, shit, Adura, your phone is too old." Anyway, how did it come about? I always knew, very soon after coming to Glasgow, one of the things I loved about the city was its architecture. Very soon after coming, I realised what the architecture was all based on, and I was like "oh, shit!" And it started haunting me every time in went to Merchant City, I was like "no, don't get seduced, it's all blood. It's all blood." And I knew that I wanted to explore that feeling of the buildings holding much more than they seduced us into believing, because they're so beautiful and they're so grand but actually it's a facade for something a lot darker. And Ghosts was a way of exploring that. I knew it had to be a walk, I knew it had to be within Merchant City, I knew it had to feel personal, and then the correlation with technology came from a simple phrase I read somewhere that slaves were the technology of their time. And slave people were the tools for advancement, economic growth and advancement. And now tech is very much that, phones, computer, tech is very much that, and I was like "ah, so somewhere in here I need to use our access to tech and how personalised it's become to tell this story." The whole project was like a mish-mash of lots of ideas sitting next to each other. So I have my phone and my phone is the tool of economic progress and makes my life a lot better, and I'm walking through the streets of Glasgow asking people to connect with the tools of a past time that allow the streets and the buildings to exist, and I just thought there were layers there that I found interesting. But again the piece never explained that. This is actually what I found beautiful about Ghosts, is that I think it was my way of trying to explore working from a visual art point of view as opposed to from a theatre point of view. Not explaining things, putting incongruous things next to each other, trusting that there's somewhere in our subconscious where everything settles a bit more, and that if we try and understand it with our minds, maybe it will feel confusing, and maybe that's all right because actually it is confusing to walk through Merchant City and know its history and still be okay with it.

J:
Or still be struck by its beauty.

A:
Exactly, it's all of it, it's a head-fuck. So, there were some aspects of Ghosts that felt like that definitely through its making. So, in answer to your question, Lucy, that's kind of how it came about, like that phrase, enslaved people were the tech of their time, the technology of that time.

L:
I find it interesting that you say you're coming from a visual art thing, because it's that fine line, isn't it? Even with Ferguson and Barton, we just opened it on Saturday, when we made it in 2019, I would say it was more visual than explanatory, like it was very much like "here's a collage of images and bits of text, here you go, audience, what do you make of this?" Whereas now because we've reworked it, we explain a lot more about what it's doing. Do you not think? A little bit.

J:
Well, you're just making me feel bad now. [LAUGHTER] I don't know, have we just made it more idiotic?

L:
No, but that's what I constantly question, when we explain it more, do we lessen the visual side of it?

A:
Yeah, power of it.

L:
Yeah.

A:
I think you've got to do a little bit of explaining, right? Yeah. But also you have to take responsibility for the fact that you're showing these in theatres, not in art galleries.

J:
I guess my response to that would be that I want to give just enough for them to be okay with…

A:
Not knowing anything.

J:
Exactly. And I think one thing we found this time around is we talk for basically the first half-hour, and then the second half-hour we don't say hardly anything, and I think that's not an accident – but we didn't mean to do that. And Lou Kept who helped out with the dramaturgy would probably have a heart attack if she came and saw what it became. [LAUGHS]
So, another thing that we've been thinking about a lot, since this is now about us, I think because we've been working on this show Ferguson and Barton for four years, it's really got into our minds. And one of the things, sometimes I have no idea what it's about, but one of the things I know it's about is roleplay, and how we put on different masks in order to function in different places. In

another interview we read with you, you were talking about playing roles in your own life, having immigrated from Nigeria to London when you were eleven or twelve – I don't know which age because one article said eleven and the other said twelve.

A:
Fucking journalists. [LAUGHTER]

J:
And if it's okay with you, I wanted to read back a quote from that interview, and maybe we can talk about it. You said, this was in the Stack World last year. You said "it was that immigrant mentality of being more like them because they got on, that was the beginning of mimicking accents, and that's probably why I got into theatre although I didn't realise it at the time. It saddens me that I found myself aged twelve…" - okay, there's my answer – "...realising my own skin wasn't the best place for me to be." And I thought that was so generous of you to share that, because that's your profession now, to share the source of something that you love is actually also a painful place. But also that that was the source of the artist you've become. And that's quite complex, and I wonder how you hold both of those things.

A:
Yeah, difficult. But, like I said, I struggle with theatre all the time, and I struggle with making theatre and seeing theatre and all of that kind of stuff, and I think that will always be the case, but I think a good thing out of that, maybe it makes me want to make certain types of work in certain pieces, or work in a particular way because of that tension and contradiction. And, yeah, I think there's also a part of me that's just… not given up, that's too extreme, but given in, maybe, to the form and understanding that in many ways even though it came from a place of trying to not be myself, my journey within it has been mostly finding myself, finding art I want to make. Even though I have a problem with theatre, I have had the freedom to explore some of that, and that feels really good. But there is always that tension that first and foremost it is an art form that doesn't invite diversity, that doesn't invite diversity of any form, really. It's not particularly open to those things, and that's the struggle, isn't it?

J:
Lots of times I think, especially when we're in making mode rather than performing mode, those tensions can be a real source of productivity. Like I'm very actively frustrated with that tension, but I don't quite want to resolve… It feels like the resolution of that tension would actually make the whole thing deflate.

A:
Yeah.

J:
And a couple of times in this interview, I've thought about that, like when you were talking about Tolu's moral stretch, or how Ghosts, the beauty of the building and the blood beneath that – you know what I mean?

A:
The contradictions. The contradictions are the thing, yeah, that's so true. Yeah, I'd stop doing it if I didn't feel those tensions and contradictions, I think, probably.

L:
Talking of theatre, you recently were Medea. How was that? We saw it, it was very good, you were wonderful.

A:
Thank you so much.

J:
Edinburgh International Festival, National Theatre, Medea.

A:
Listen, I've gone through a kind of… I cannot tell… I know I always do this, I'm always dramatic about everything, "well, it was the most… and I learned this…" [LAUGHS] It's like "calm the fuck down, it's just a show." I haven't acted since Creditors, which was 2017.

J:
Jesus.

L:
Wow, that's a long time. And also that feels…

A:
It was. That's five years ago, right? Okay. And I'd stopped really seeing myself as an actor, I wasn't particularly comfortable acting in Creditors, by the way, but I've never been comfortable being an actor, to be honest. Too much of a gaze on the audience and not enough on myself. Not enough on the play. And I think part of that was an insecurity and a "this feels odd." And I don't know whether it's the pandemic or whether it's taking a break of five years, or whether it's about going into film and completely leaving theatre, whether it's the fact I don't have a burning ambition to be an actor, that just loosened all the tensions for me, and I was able to explore this character in a very specific way. I knew she's a mother, I'm a mother, I knew that that was not a place I was going to go to. I wasn't going to use my daughter or my motherhood as a way of understanding Medea's actions at the end of the play, so I needed another way in. And even making that choice is not something I think I would have been able to do before. I would have been like "no, in order to really get the emotion, I have to go to that dark place otherwise nobody will believe me." But coming back to it now, I was like "no, I'm more important, and my daughter's more important than this play, so what am I going to use?" And there was even something more potent, which I didn't realise, which was rage. And I think I spoke about this a bit, somebody interviewed, and they were like "what are you using to get into this character?" And I was like "rage." Because actually I don't think I've ever really explored rage in my life, like letting it fuel what I do. And maybe that's a good thing, because I probably wouldn't be safe, or other people wouldn't be safe, but Medea is an opportunity to explore rage. That feeling that starts up that we repress and talk our way through and kind of calm, what about if you let that feeling continue to bubble and be its own thing and let it out? So, it's fascinating doing that because it's so powerful, it's so liberating. It's also mad. There's a reason why we don't allow ourselves to explore rage to the extent she does, but I think we go back the other way – or I do – too much, and suppress it too much, so it was really liberating to explore that. And then I think I had this really interesting moment with the director after the first dress rehearsal, and I'm sure he won't mind me saying this, my note was "I don't believe you. I don't believe this Medea would kill her children. I think you're still trying to explain her to the audience. You're still trying to humanise her for the audience so that they feel for her and

understand why she does what she does." And he was like "that's you, that's not Medea. Medea is so full of rage, she doesn't care what anybody thinks, otherwise why would she… If she cared, she wouldn't kill her kid. She doesn't care what anybody thinks. So you need to be liberated at not caring what the audience thinks, not caring what anybody else thinks." And that was a real light bulb moment for me as an artist as well and as an actor, just going "oh, god, it doesn't matter what any of you think." And I think that seeped into my marrow a little bit, and that's been really nice. So there have been a few times since production has ended I've been like "what would Medea do?" [LAUGHTER] Not so much the killing and the poisoning of human beings and her children! But the kind of focus and belief. Of course she's not a character without doubt, she's got a lot of doubt. Does that answer the question? It's had a profound effect on me.

J:
It's one of those, again we're really in the Western canon here, foundational.

A:
Yes!

J:
And there's this complexity, ripping, it's so in the canon, or whatever that means, it's so in the Western… not just the canon, our mindsets, how we define ourselves…

A:
Exactly.

J:
...how we view the world. And yet it's also providing… not providing, you're also accessing it in a way that's liberatory and…

A:
Exactly. Those contradictions are mad, right? And it's all about the choices that you make. I guess for all of us within these ancient works we keep having to ask ourselves "why are you putting it on again? What is it saying? What are you doing with it that's different? What are you saying with this?" And I think with the staging of this production, with Liz's language, for me as a black woman it felt really empowering and liberating, even though what she does isn't, in many ways.

J:
I felt, watching it, that by the end of it, I wasn't being invited to judge her. And I thought that was really powerful. Because we live in such a… again, I'm pounding my theory, because we live in a world that's addicted to virtue, it was really radical to feel like I'm not here to say whether this is good. This isn't about goodness or badness.

A:
No, it isn't, you're absolutely right. And I never judged her for killing the kids. And I have a kid, so that's mad. But I never did. And again it's that thing of history is peppered with mothers killing their children. Like Beloved by Toni Morrison was based on an enslaved woman was going to lose… her kids were going to be sold to a different plantation, and so she killed them. And Toni Morrison wrote Beloved as a result of that. Now, that, in one way you can go "yeah, she's justified in killing them", and in Medea's own head she's justified in killing them, but I am not interested in

judging that woman or Medea, the fact is it happens and women do it and men do it and it still happens. I think it's really nice the production didn't try and vilify her for that.

L:
How was it getting into that rage for… how long did you do it for, a month?

A:
Yeah, a month. Physically, I did it physically. I had a couple of ticks I did physically before I went on stage, they were very simple, one was to hype myself up like I was in a boxing ring, and then the other was to lead with my chest. Those were the two things, and somehow…

L:
That did it.

A:
Yeah. And obviously commuting to the words completely. The words are so violent, like a lot of consonants, and just committing to them. That was the physical way of getting into it. Yeah, I got into it physically, I think.

L:
Do you always get into stuff physically? Or is that a new…? Just because you were talking about very early on you had a dance company, so…

A:
Yeah! I don't know. Lucy, I'm very confused by my career. I definitely was, and I thought like a dancer and I was a dancer for many years, I would say I did it professionally for a good six or seven years, like I only worked with dance companies. And then I was just like "I need to speak, the body isn't enough", but unfortunately, in training to speak I just left the body, I was like "bye! You never existed, we're all up here now!" And it's so interesting because acting became so cerebral and insecure-making because I was all up here all the time. And maybe Medea offered me, somehow, without realising, the chance to go back the other and remember what it felt like to be in the body. Like I still want to make a piece of work, before my body completely falls apart, that is physically based. I'll still chat, but I want to go back to that. I might not be able to because I'm so unfit and I haven't done any work in a long time.

J:
Don't be ridiculous!

A:
But I want to do that, I want to pay homage to that because I think that theatre, acting, it says it's physical but your training isn't really physical, weirdly. Even though you do physical stuff there, there isn't a physical sensibility that goes into that training, and so you get this separation.

L:
Thanks Adura.

J:
Thank you so much.

A:
Thank you.

J:
That was Adura Onashile, we're really grateful to Adura for speaking with us and that she's been a part of our artistic community in Scotland, and continues to be. You can find some links about Adura in the episode description. And that, I'm sad to say, is the last of this three part mini-series on film, the first season, I very much hope, not the last, of the Shotput podcast. We want to keep making episodes as we make future work, so please do tell us what you think. You can find several ways to reach us on our website, www.shotput.org, also on the website you can find information on how you can see Ferguson and Barton, we are on tour now until the 15th of October. Our upcoming performances are in Inverness on Tuesday the 27th of September, Glasgow on Friday the 30th of September, Lyth on Tuesday the 4th of October, Greenock on Saturday October 8th, and finally for this leg of the tour Shetland on Saturday the 15th of October. Some of these venues are also screening the Hitchcock film Vertigo a day or two before or after the film, so if you really want to dig into the world that we've been in, you can listen to the podcast, watch the film, and see us at the live show. This podcast was made with the generous support of Creative Scotland. It was hosted by myself, Jim Manganello, and Lucy Ireland. It was edited by Sonia Kilman who also composed the podcast music, thank you so much Sonia for making these conversations snappy and easy to listen to. The artwork for the podcast and also for the live show Ferguson and Barton is by Scott McMichael who designs under the name Gallusness, and you should check out his stuff, it's super. You can find links to Sonya and Scott in the podcast description. Thank you for listening right to the end, hope we meet you on tour, till then, take care, goodbye.

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