

## **Black Theatre Workshop's La Parole**

Episode 6 – Canonize It: Function, Form, and Focus of Black Theatre

Panel Discussion with Thom Allison, Neema Bickersteth, and Kym Dominique-Ferguson

Featuring Dian Marie Bridge (Dian), Thom Allison (Thom), Neema Bickersteth (Neema) and Kym Dominique-Ferguson

**[00:00:00]** – [Theme music: "Cocktail Music" by Francesco Biondi]

**[00:00:12]** – **Dian:** Welcome to La Parole, BTW's podcast series. Black Theatre Workshop is launching a new podcast series to reach all of the artists and storytellers across Montreal, into Quebec, and into Canada. We are bringing you conversations with some of Canada's most exciting theatre artists, musicians, and storytellers, and we're so happy to have you join us.

**[00:00:36]** – [Theme music continues]

**[00:00:40]** – **Lydie:** Before we start, we would like to recognize that the province we call Quebec is a fusion of traditional territories of the Innu and Inuit Nations, of the Algonquin Nations, as well as Mohawk Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Kanienkehaka and Anishnabeg ne sont que deux des langues originales de ce territoire. Kanienkehaka and Anishnabeg are two of the many original languages of this territory. L'Atikamekw, le Cree, L'Inuktitut, et L'Innu-aimun, font également parti des nombreuses langues autochtones parler à travers le Québec comme langues majoritaires all long before French and English. We, therefore, recognize the important work accomplished by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, to revive the traditional languages of these territories and the advocacy for the official status of Indigenous languages. Nous exprimons notre plus profond respect aux aînés de ces communautés et à tous les peuples autochtones. Yes, we express our deepest respect to the elders of these communities and all Indigenous people who tell the story of the land and waters of Tiótiá'ke, who take care of Turtle Island, and who are here at home. We see you. We support you. We are honoured to share our stories on these lands. And now, time for La Parole.

**[00:02:06]** – [Club Zed musical intro]

**[00:02:09]** – **Dian:** Hi, everybody, and welcome to day two of Club Zed. This afternoon, we are here at the "Canonize It!" panel session, um where we are inviting some of the country's most prominent artists to have a conversation about the function of... theatre in the Black community. Welcome to anyone who's joining us. Uh, and my name is Dian, and I am the Artistic Director at the Black Theatre Workshop. I think I already said that; I'm not 100% sure at this point—

**[00:02:37]** – **Thom:** That's all right.

**[00:02:37]** – **Dian:** because that's the kind of day it's been. Um, but, uh I am a theatre practitioner who's been, you know, since I was five years old, in church plays, and I write, I direct, I sometimes perform, um I do dramaturgical work with artists, um, and produce, which is the, the major thing. Um, and I'm going to invite my panel here to introduce themselves and talk a little bit about their, um, their function— uh

their first role in theatre, and what kind of got them started in the performing arts! So I'm going to start here with Neema!

**[00:03:14] – Neema:** Okay, my name is Neema, and I am a singer. I, uh, I started in classical music. Um, I have a degree in opera, and um I am a theatre maker and creator and actor as well. And my first, first experience (chuckles) in theatre, I mean, I don't know where to begin. Of course, I was a kid and I was a singer, doing my thing. That didn't feel like "theatre" necessarily, that just felt like performing. Um, I think that after opera school, um I— I do think that operas are theatre, um but I'm going to skip past that and after, after I finished opera school and I was sitting around as a classical singer, I, um, was interested in going beyond what the standard repertoire of opera had to offer me. Um, traditional roles are— it's kind of like Shakespeare roles, um and I felt like I didn't quite belong there. So, um, I did a lot of new music and new works, and those types of operatic, um, operas, um that felt like theatre and opera together. And, um, and so the one that's popping into my head right now was a (chuckles), a show set in a bar, like in a dirty little bar. (all laughing) And the music was um with acoustic—, an electroacoustic guitar. The composer was an electroacoustic guitar player. And so there was like, (mimicking an electroacoustic instrument) like strange weirdo noises that I would have to like sort of hear that and be like, (singing a melody without words) "Okay, that's my note," and start singing. (laughing) So it was pretty wild. But the show started off sitting at the bar for like the first half an hour, just having beers. And whoever came in, they came in, they'd sit at the bar, and they knew they were coming to a show, but I was already at the bar, they didn't know that I was in it. We'd be chatting, just hanging out. And then... (singing a high operatic note) It would begin! (all laughing) They were just like, "What is happening!" That felt like theatre to me. That was like, "Yes, here we are. Let's make this thing happen." (laughing)

**[00:06:09] – Kym:** My name is Kym... (clears throat) My name is Kym Dominique-Ferguson. I am um, okay, so I'm a born poet, a trained filmmaker, and a producer, playwright, grant writer, director, et cetera, et cetera, by nurture. Okay, I'll go with the first memorable theatre experience. The first one wasn't that good. (Dian chuckling) Um, I played the Chef in *The Little Mermaid*. That was my first real, like, (someone snapping) I was the star of that moment because it's huge. It's like, well, the reason why I got it is because I spoke French. It was set in Jamaica. We were in Jamaica at the time. I was living in Jamaica at the time, and I was the only one in the entire school that spoke French. So it was like, oh, give Kym the "les poissons, les poissons, hee hee hee, hon hon hon." And um, and I got a standing ovation at the end of it. Like doing the whole thing, crashing into furniture with Sebastian and trying to throw him in the pot, chop off his head, the whole shebang. (Dian laughing) I pretty much just always, um, was always very theatrical. I was always imitating, um, TV shows, the Richard Cryer's, the Eddie Murphy's, the Bill Cosby's. I was always doing stand-up for my parents, and it was just a natural progression. Um and how I got into theatre school was my dad, it was 1997, and my dad was like, "Okay, so what are you doing after high school?" I was like, (mumbling "I don't know"). He was like, "Well, why don't you go to

theatre school?" And I was like, "Yeah, that sounds good." And "Hey, have you gone to get the papers to sign up for the auditions?" "When I get..." (making sound that indicates no), "Have you gone to get the—" " And he drove me to the theatre school, and he made me walk in, and I went and got the papers, signed up and everything. Did the audition with three stone-faced auditioners, and I walked out of the audition knowing that I got into it. And I was so excited about it, that I actually called them before I got, and this was in the time of like sending you everything by snail mail, so had to go through... And they were like, "We just sent you the stuff, so you'll be receiving it soon, but yeah, you're in?"

**[00:08:45] – Dian:** Wow.

**[00:08:46] – Kym:** Because I was that excited and that, like, in a sense, going from like completely nonchalant, "I don't really know what I'm doing after high school," to like, "Yeah, I'm in theatre." And um, so I just, that's how— that's how I ended up there. That's, that's what I— that was my trajectory from *The Little Mermaid* to theatre school.

**[00:09:09] – Dian:** Wow. (chuckles)

**[00:09:11] – Thom:** Amazing, wow. Um, fantastic. I'm Thom Allison, and uh I'm an actor, singer, uh creator, writer, director, things, uh fancy people at this fantastic panel. Um, I um, I grew up in Winnipeg, born and raised in Winnipeg. And my earliest memory is when I was four years old and I wanted to be an actor. I wanted to be an actor and a fireman and a— and a designer and whatever. No, I don't think I knew what it was at four years old? I don't think it's possible. But, um over the years, the other things would change, but I always had this actor thing sitting there. My mother, god bless her, one day, when I was 10 said, "Do you want to... try that?" I hadn't done anything, but she then— I said, "Oh, yeah!" So she through, uh, a work friend of hers found this 10-week acting course for kids on a Saturday you know for, for 10 weeks. And I did this course, and I was like, "Oh, my god, I love the imagination!" And this teacher was kind of amazing. We did like breath work and imagination work on the floor and you're floating, all these things. And I was so in it and so inspired by it, um, but it wasn't until two years later when I got into my first show at what was then Actor's Showcase in Winnipeg, which is now Manitoba Theatre for Young People. Um, that old, god bless. (others laughing) And, (clearing throat) and we did *Tale of the Red Dragon*, a fantastically uh shameless uh piece of cultural appropriation, that was— but like for a kid, it was so— the idea that you could be the other things! It was this, this Asian story of these friends, they travel... But the imagination of you're in the water with the sheets and fun costumes. And I love the idea of being transformed. I was shy as a kid, so for me, um I knew I was shy, and I knew I didn't want to spend my life being just a shy person that didn't go out and do things. So I convinced myself that I had to adopt the motto, um, "Say yes, throw up later." So whenever I said yes, I had to do it. So it was "oh, uh..." I always go "Sure!" Then I go, "Oh, ugh." (others chuckling) And so that became the mantra, so I started doing more things and getting out there. Then when I was 17, I auditioned for, um, what was then Ryerson Theatre School and got in. So I left and went there to the theatre school, and then so we took off after that.

**[00:11:34] – Dian:** Amazing. Thank you, thank you. Um, because this is a playwrights festival, I know um, well, Kym is a writer, um primarily, but both Neema and Tom, you, you expressed like, "Me? Why should I be part of this?" And uh I just wanted to refocus, though, that um this is about the state of Black theatre in general, and the hope is to inspire people who want to start writing, to actually take the opportunity to reflect on their, their own journey and uh increase the number of people who are actually putting stories out, because I don't think it's limited just to people who consider themselves writers. I think creators in general, um, can start to create works that can be shared. Um, so earlier this week, we had a little bit of a touch base, and we, uh, put down some questions. So I wanted to like open this conversation with the idea of the function of theatre in Black communities and how it actually functions for us. What does it do for our communities? How does like the idea of archiving story and telling our stories? Um and for myself, it's, um, something that's always shifting and moving. But I wanted to just open it up to see if anybody (someone clearing throat) had any ideas or any kind of point that they wanted to make, or— just to start this conversation a little bit.

**[00:12:52] – Thom:** I want to tell this. Um, um, the first time I went to Stratford, to the Stratford Festival, I was um, should I say what year old that actually made me. (chuckling) But it, I was 14, and I went there for the day, and I saw, um, *Much Ado About Nothing*. And then I saw *Cabaret* with Sheila McCarthy and Brent Carver playing Sally and The Emcee. Uh, and I remember being so moved and— by the stories, and I was thrilled by the size and the costumes and, and what was available to them. I wasn't aware at the time that I never saw anyone of colour, not one body of colour on that stage. But I also wasn't aware that I would ever have a place there? And it was six years later that I was there in the Young Company. And I remember being so shocked when I was asked to audition, because I didn't know people of colour could be there. I didn't know I could want that! And it didn't matter to me; I didn't think about it. It was a wonderful place for people who aren't me. So, so I had to wrap my head around the idea that I got to go there, too, and be a part of that world. So in terms of the idea of what we're— what playwriting, what, what theatre is in Black communities, the idea that we actually have stories to tell, the idea that we actually have a right to be on the stages telling all of our stories, all the colours, all the backgrounds, all the history, um, um, that we have lore, we have folkloric lore that's worth actually being seen and dramatized, I think, is magic for any young Black person, Black being, to understand from the minute they're born, that our stories, our background, and our— and our, um, histories have worth.

**[00:14:29] – Dian:** I think, too— yeah, that's a really, really good point. I think, too, there's a, a thing about, um, folks who have immigrated to Canada and that we're coming from cultures that have storytelling traditions and have performance-based traditions that we kind of leave behind when we get here, right? Um and Kym, because you come from Jamaica, did you want to comment on that at all?

**[00:14:52] – Kym:** Well, for me, when it comes to theatre, it started with my father telling me Anansi stories, and he would animate all the different characters in it. Um, so for me, story and theatre was something that was intrinsically intertwined with my childhood and intertwined with my family. And

coming back to Montreal, because I was born here, but I was raised in Jamaica and Haiti, coming back to Montreal, um, the importance of story was already ingrained in me because when I turn on the television in Jamaica or Haiti, I see myself. It— it was a shock for me to come here and I didn't see myself as much as that. Um and then what I started doing is I started finding... finding people who looked like me, finding people who sounded like me, um, buying up all of the movies with all of the Black people that I could find, uh, reading all of the books I could find, um, just making that a deliberate decision. Uhhh, at first, I, I had no intention to— to get into playwriting. My intention was to get into the filmmaking, and I would be, I would be Spike Lee-ing it up. (others chuckling) I would be acting and directing, and directing and acting, and acting and directing. That was my— that was my original intention. But um being— being in the filmmaking industry in, in film class, I was the only Black— Black person in all of my classes, most of my classes, rather. Um, and when I looked at the industry, there was nobody that looked like me working behind the scenes, so it wasn't favourable to, to kind of put myself there. So I turned kind of to my poetry and theatre roots, and I started my own company, and I was like, "If I don't see it happening, then I'm just going to make it happen myself. I'm going to, um, bring some poets together, and we're going to do a show that's kind of theatrically-based." And uh, so that's kinda how— how I got to like, back to theatre, like kind of going full circle from *The Little Mermaid* to film school to back to theatre. And um, then telling stories, like writing my own play and becoming a, a part of the group that wrote *Blackout*, um was something that just kind of happened by— by like wanting to get back to theatre. Um, my father was diagnosed with a Klatskin tumor in 2015, and because of his prominence in, in Jamaica, they didn't want us to, to speak about it. My family didn't want us to say anything about it. (clears throat) And so I started with the Dear Black Man posts. They were literal Twitter posts to kind of like give myself an outlet, to let myself know that it's okay for me to express myself, even though I couldn't really do it. And one thing led to another. I got nominated to participate in this thing called Pitch the Dream, um which happens in the Black community, and I was like, "What am I going to do?" And then I was like, "Oh, let me turn this Dear Black Man Twitter post into a one-man play." And, Warona, my mentor at the time was like, I was trying to audition because I was in the AMP program. I was trying to audition, and I couldn't get in. Auditions for me, extremely stressful; I hate it. Um and I ended up... I ended up— she ended up telling me, "Write your own stories and put them out that way." And so I was like, "All right, let me, let me write this play." And I did that. And just the universe opens the doors for you whenever you say this is what you want. You never know which door is going to open, but the right one is open for you. And soo Pitch the Dream led to me getting a residency at the MAI, led to me getting a residency in Banff. Um, turned the play from a one-man play to a family play, um grew it into like this very intricate like story about fatherhood, which I didn't even think about at the beginning. This wasn't— it wasn't at the forefront of my mind. And so it became very important to me to, to, to tell stories. And I also— I also host a radio show and during the pandemic, I had an opportunity to reframe the show because originally the show was like, "Okay, we're inviting guests on

for like 15 minutes slots.” And then it became what I call a “radio documentary.” So I get an hour and a half to sit down with someone and talk about their life and their story. And these are all Black people. (chuckles) So for 52 weeks of the year, I get to interview 52 different Black people about what they're doing. And their lives in the city of Montreal, in Canada, and of—, and internationally. So, for me, Black stories is, is just— it's huge in my life, and it takes a lot of space in my life.

**[00:20:26] – Dian:** How we present ourselves or what our priorities are— has that shifted in you over the years at all in terms of the work you pursue or the focus that you have? And I know for myself, it's true. The focus has shifted, but I'm just wondering about your experiences. And I'll ask you, would you like to start?

**[00:20:48] – Thom:** Uh yeah! I um... My father was black from Nova Scotia. My mother was from Canada, but her parents were German-speaking Dutch Mennonite from Russia. So (dramatically emphasizing) *white*. What was amazing was my dad from Nova Scotia was so laid back and easy, that, that way that Nova Scotians are. And didn't have anything to prove about his masculinity or his blackness, he just sat inside. He was a beautiful chocolate colour, um and they married in 1960. So as you can imagine, there were death threats. They couldn't get apartments. They lived through all of that! But they held each other closer through all of that and, and made themselves the center of, of their world so that people... That didn't interfere with their love in the middle. But my mother, my dad's friend used to joke that she's like, “Oh, she's one of us. She was like a black woman.” How she comported herself in the world, and her power was outrageous. So between the two of them, they were always like, “You're not worth anything less than anyone else.” My mother was a bit of a tigress, so she was known— the school didn't want her to come because if she came, “Is it Mary Allison's son? Don't. Don't call her. Don't. Let it go. (all laughing) My brother you know— I was fine, my brother was a bit of a hellion, he was older than I was. (Dian laughing) So it was, “Is it Brad's mother? Don't call her. Don't let her come in. Please, God, don't let her come in.” Um so, with that, I didn't carry a sense of, of burden. I was aware that, of course, you're in a room auditioning, and they're, you know, “Can you be more urban?” Oh, Blacker? I see. Right. Okay. So you get that, and that is what it is. But when I was first starting out, uh, coming up in and getting in the theatre, it was one of the sort of last big times, it was a big question towards the diversity of stage on film and everything. I dark enough to fulfill the quota, but not too dark to be threatening.

**[00:22:34] – Dian:** Ohh yeah.

**[00:22:35] – Thom:** And with the green eyes, they were like, “He'd be good.” I was like, “Oh, I see.” So I got work with a friend of mine who was my female counterpart at the time around Toronto. We were doing a lot of stage shows, musicals, and things. She'd be the “Black girl” of the show, I'd be the “Black boy” of the show or the TV thing, whatever, so I was aware that I was, um, filling a quota, but because, thank god, my parents were like, “your worth.” So I never felt like a burden of “Oh, no. Is it only because of that?” I didn't care. Whatever the reason, I'm here now, and so I just thought it's my job to be good at

this and make this worthwhile. Um and because of that, I was very fortunate where, um, I did a lot of musicals for a long time. It wasn't my intention, but it sort of went down that way. I started getting early on roles in shows that would normally be white people, white men in leading parts. I had directors who, thank god, trusted me to go, "We want you for this." That is— I was able to play with the idea of "What does my Blackness do in this role?"

**[00:23:36] – Dian:** Yeah!

**[00:23:36] – Thom:** Which was fantastic! Sometimes it's a case of "It's just there." It's not going to be a thing. It's just me being here isn't going to tell a story. I was very conscious, and most of the time I had directors who were willing to have a conversation, although it was mostly like, "Sure, that sounds good," whatever it was going to be. But I could explain. But I don't know what to say about that. So yes, they were mostly white. I worked with a black director for many years early on. Um, but I was able to take and use of something. When I did the Emcee in *Cabaret*, what does him being Black mean? When I was doing *Daddy Warbucks*, I went to talk to the director and said, "I think this is a mistake. I'm too Black, I'm too young," (chuckling) what a time. But, but I came in and as we were talking, and he was so game, thank god, an older white director, but he was so interested. As we talked through it, we saw how it's possible. It's because he's supposed to be cold and hard to get things moving. So the melting of his heart with his girl, like it became part of the Black storyline. (sounds of agreement from others) It, it ended up being so exciting. So, I've had some really, really amazing opportunities, which I know are not common, where I was able to explore in a white-centric world of theatre, where I got to be the Black body, where it was almost always welcomed and worth exploring to the people in charge. So I thought that— So on my flip side, as a director, I'm always aware of I want people of colour in the show. I want to have all kinds of bodies in the show, um, and not, let's say, all one kind of body. Because I'm also aware being a mixed being. I love when worlds come together, and I think it makes better worlds when we can tell. But I love that there's options that we can have all our own stories. We can have stories that we are as interesting and as part of the story in a show. So now that's the world that fascinates me all the time.

**[00:25:20] – Dian:** I think it's a really interesting point about bringing the fullness of yourself into a character, but also in relationship to writing, bringing the fullness of your story into the world, where we've been finding this thing of a default understanding of the world. And now that you're bringing in alternate experiences and alternate languages, just playing with language as well, it brings a completely different understanding of how things are moving or the rationale behind certain decisions. A character walking into a room and then immediately walking out, what is that about? Depending on who they are, right?

**[00:25:56] – Thom:** Right.

**[00:25:56] – Dian:** Yeah. That's what we're saying. I think it's— I think it's a really interesting point. I kind of want to dig into it a little bit more. There was a production that I was assistant directing production of *The Misanthrope*, and it was an English translation um of the Molière. But essentially, the English

translation are always like the servants are in the background, they're not really doing much. They're just you know in the back. Um but I know in the French that they are the puppeteers, almost. They are the people who have all the information, who drive the story, who make the situations comical. But also there was this understanding of the French court at the time being that... Louis, the...

**[00:26:41] – Thom:** The Sun God.

**[00:26:42] – Dian:** Yeah, the Sun God.

**[00:26:46] – Thom:** The Sun King.

**[00:26:46] – Dian:** The Sun King. And then the idea of this character saying that he hates people and he wants to move to some uninhabited island. And then he's thinking, well, in that time, the Caribbean, and the French Caribbean, specifically, they categorized people as flora and fauna, so technically, it's uninhabited. Is he really saying that he wants to go to Guadeloupe and like be a slave master? Is that what he's actually saying? (others agreeing) That reality is what I would offer and bring to that room and to that characterization, right? Any other revelations like that or any other findings like that for anybody here? Like any kind of digging into something that your Blackness speaks to the understanding of the character or understanding of the world that other people might not have considered before?

**[00:27:37] – Thom:** When I did *Mary Poppins*, at YPT. Um, one, our Mary was Black. It was a fantastic job, Vanessa Sears, um which was great, but what broke the show open for me, I've always found with the script of musical, the mother of the— in the family seems a bit of a dishrag, how it's written. It's all about her husband. She's afraid of him a little bit. Um and when Joel Blackman came in (others gasping), I'll tell you about her audition, she came in and she said, "You want a British accent?" I said, "Sure." This was telling in a couple of ways, which is great to talk about in this space. She said, "Okay, I've never done one." I said, "Really?" and she said, "Look at me. When do I get asked to do British drama?" I went, "Fair enough!" It didn't even occur to me. It just never happens. She tried a British accent, and it was okay. I went, "Hmm. What's your family accent?" And she went, "Oh, my god." I said, "What?" She said, "Is it my mother." I said "Go." And she pulled out this— her family accent and all of a sudden, the idea of Mrs. Banks, um a world she'd be in if she were that Black woman coming here as a um (stammering) as an immigrant, basically, marrying into this family. So it's not about her being shy um or being under her husband, but trying to understand the culture she's in as a wife of this British banker with these mixed children. We had a white child and a Black child.

**[00:29:03] – Dian:** Wow.

**[00:29:03] – Thom:** It opened the whole show in terms of her strength was about, "I'm trying to pay attention and trying to do this right as a woman in the world that I'm in that's new." But then her strength that she acquires is her coming into herself again as the Black woman that she is. It changed the whole show. And the response, people wouldn't necessarily be able to explain it, but the response was exactly what I had when I went, "Oh, my God, that's amazing." Because people— these kids were like, "It's my family!" It's this world and it explained her behavior and explained then the love that they



had, that he was trying to make this all work for everyone. Like it just— the whole show opened up in a way that I never imagined, uh, a depth of cultural understanding, family understanding and the depth of love as my parents inside that, that it's going to be hard, but our love is worth it, changed what they're all fighting for on the show and made a completely different production for me.

**[00:29:55] – Dian:** That's amazing. Yeah, that's very cool. In terms of like folks who want to start writing stories, one of the things that I've noticed over the last, like, 20 years or so is the idea of keeping the audience in mind? So early days, you'd see people writing a lot of slave narratives or diary entries about how tough it is being black, or how tough it is being biracial, or how tough it is being the only person in your school, like that sort of thing. Um and I'm seeing a shift now away from that, where the focus is no longer on, um, having a conversation as the other, but the focus is more about conversing with ourselves and stepping into that fullness of self. Um, have, have any of you found in working with newer pieces that that is— and I'm thinking specifically *Treemonisha*, but if you could speak to that a little bit.

**[00:30:55] – Neema:** Yeah, sure. Um, so I feel like that's sort of my career trajectory is just continually trying to step into myself. And (chuckling) um so actually, my first thought wasn't *Treemonisha*, but *Century Song*—

**[00:31:14] – Dian:** Mmm!

**[00:31:14] – Neema:** which um you know 'cause this is a playwright's thing, and I helped create. So it— there are no words, so I didn't write anything per se, but three of us created it. And um, and there's dancing, and there's songs without words, and a narrative. And um, and so at first, when we were creating it, we just had a bunch of songs with no words, and we were creating choreography based on that. And I was singing Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise", which is written by a classical composer around 1910, Russian composer, and um, and then I'm doing modern dance at the same time. And we were trying to figure out what it meant or what the intention was. Um it was a little bit backwards of going into creating a piece, but we were trying to figure out the goals. And everyone was just throwing ideas out, and you know, of course, at some point, I finished singing it and someone asked me, "Well, who are you in this? How do you feel in this?" And I couldn't answer. I kept trying to answer, and I couldn't answer. And I realized it was because when I sing classical music, I... imagine I'm the character of a white person. And so I realized that I was pretending to be some white woman. And so that was the deep—

**[00:33:16] – Dian:** Yeah.

**[00:33:16] – Neema:** moment of realization and like kind of painful as well. And so that was like, for the creation of the piece, a huge moment, obviously, personally for me and then for the piece. I said, "No, this is me. I'm not— obviously not playing anymore. I'm making this right now, and it's me. So I have to really dig in and, and put me to the forefront." When you're talking about you know creating things for the audience, um often I would say, I want this piece to be for an audience of me. If it was all just Neemas sitting out there, like that's what I'm making this for. I had to do that because obviously I had been rewired so badly to think that I wasn't me anymore. And um, and so the discovery of, "Now, what's

the goal? And who is this?" I thought, "Well, this is— from then on, the writing of the piece became about if Neema was in 1910, who would she have been?" So was born Neema, real Neema, was born and raised (all laughing), born in Alberta. And so if I was a Black woman in Alberta in 1910, who would I have been? And that became where the story began and um a way into creating this story. And we basically just went on a journey through time. If now, if I was in the 1920s, if I was in, you know, in Montreal, I'm a singer. Okay. Now, if I was in the 1970s, I'm my mom. She's doing everything. She's working. She's taking care of the kids. She's taking care of her family. She's an immigrant. She's like doing it all. Okay, now, until we made our way to now. Now, I am— who am I in this moment? I have all of this history and all of these women that I carry in my body and then I sang a song with that. And um, and yea, so that was a very powerful way in to creating the piece. And um, and seeing myself in the work, it's this strange thing of having to remind— learning that representation matters, but I almost had to look into a mirror to understand that I was actually the one representing, and I could be inspired by the representation of myself.

**[00:36:18] – Dian:** That's huge. Like, that's a huge... Yeah. I'm still getting my head around that because having gone through formal education, and studying all the colonial canons, like the idea of approaching a character or approaching the way of storytelling is something that we've adapted, right? And to centre ourselves is radical. It really is. It really is. I'm just trying to think of moments where if I'd had that realization, I don't know if that actually hit me in the same way, that's wild. Yeah. Kym.

**[00:37:09] – Kym:** I feel like having grown up in Jamaica, native is a real privilege because I was trying to remember any moments where like where— because we did do Shakespeare in theatre school, but there was no, "Oh, I'm in the body of a white man." It was like, "I am playing Hamlet. I am playing Macbeth. I'm not trying to be this white person that I see, it's this is who I am." And when I approached— when I approach the writing for *#DearBlackMan*, there was no trying to figure out my place. Uh I was privileged enough that I grew up in a country where most of the people looked and sounded like me. And even if they didn't, they still sounded like me, and the culture was still the same. So, you know, "out of many one people." And as I approach writing, writing the characters, I'm already in the beat of, I'm writing from my experience my joy, my pain, my everything, but I want to bring that on stage. One of the things that for me, I noticed in Black stories is that it's very trauma centered. Like almost all of our stories are centered around somebody dying, some— a parent dying, a child dying, some racist thing happening. And when I was writing, *#DearBlackMan*, when I first wrote the first few drafts of the family, it was ve— and I reread them recently, um reread one of the draughts recently, and I was like, "This is extremely violent." And I was so happy that it moved away from that because I feel like we have other stories to tell. We— we're not only living in pain. We are joyful. We, we have children, and there's joy within our children, and there's pain within our children. There's— we are not just, "Okay, some racist shit happened, and now we're sad," which is a lot of our stories, you know. And so for me, when it comes to writing, I want us, I want to give us other narratives. I don't want to erase

the narrative of the pain that we've been through, because we have been through it. But I feel like it's time to hear some more stories outside of the usual stuff. And that way it's going to open the eyes of the other people because they're going to understand that there's a difference. There's, "Oh, you know, this is a story about a, a man who's trying to figure out, I want to be an artist, what I want to be and I'm going accountant, and how do I do that?" That's something that crosses cultural boundaries. A lot of cultural boundaries, um not only in the Black diaspora, and it's things that can reach people as well as to humanize us and to understand that we're not only about trauma, we're not only about pain, we're about so much more. We have a lot more different concerns. So when it comes to like approaching the characters, that's something that I keep at the forefront of my mind because I, you know I have a son, and I want my son to see the stories and the different possibilities as well. You know, obviously, I'm going to teach him about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, but there are other, there are other things to learn as well and other things to know. Decentralizing trauma has been something that is, is very much in the forefront of my mind. Can't completely escape it because in traditional Caribbean households, you need to be a doctor, a lawyer, (Thom laughing) an accountant, or an architect. There's the big three, and so— but that is all trauma-centered. That is all like, we need to make money so that we can survive. Whereas there's a lot of artists that thrive, you know, and we need to be able to present that option and be like, "Hey, we don't have to stay in that trauma now." We can become successful by telling other stories and by doing other things apart from being a doctor or a lawyer.

**[00:41:50] – Dian:** Just to add to that, I think too the idea of being immigrants to Canada, a lot of that trauma is you hold on to it because it's about survival in this place, right? It's about, um, making sure that you don't starve, that you're in a place where you can't be as free as if you were in Jamaica. Yes, you could be a theatre artist in Jamaica, but like here in Canada, where are you going to go? There's two theatre companies, two major Black theatre companies in the country, BTW and Obsidian, and both of them are like holding an entire country together in terms of like the programming, do you know what I mean? And that, that almost privilege that you have to be able to just be in yourself and know that you're communicating to a community that sees you as a whole being is a different thing as well. And then even recently, like even on the administrative side, being in an organization where you come in as a contract worker and then are responsible for bringing in all the diversity (chuckling) in their programming. Like, "Do you know anyone?" That's what you're saying? Yeah. Yeah, it's really interesting. Yeah. Thank you for that. Um, I'm going to go to our list of questions, or Thom, did you want to add to that?

**[00:43:14] – Thom:** No. I wanted to say something. It's funny, you said that literally at breakfast this morning, I was, I was having eggs, and I thought, "How much of— certainly racialized, and it's just particularly Black theatre is trauma-based. It's like there can be drama without trauma. We don't get a lot of that. But what I also just thought of as you were talking, which was amazing, is there was so much joy in Black gatherings that I rarely see or hear about dramatized for us on stage. Like, it's like an

intense... If a Black joy were like an energy, it could light all of North America. But you get to, get to 20 black people. It's like the laughter and the size of the opposite of the trauma parts that we learn to survive in spite of what was done to us—

**[00:44:03] – Dian:** Yes!

**[00:44:03] – Thom:** that we get together and find joy, which I think makes a lot of racists crazy, that we still manage to be happy despite what they try and do to us. And that our joy is so big. It's like, “They're out loud, they're all screaming and loud.” (Others laughing) It's like, “Yeah, you will not silence us. Our joy will make you crazy till the day you die.” That's something that I would love to see writers kind of also express because it's just as huge the dark parts, but it rarely seems to get the air time yet we know we get together in the craziness. Like some of my— my dad and his pals all came – he was bored of VIA Rail, so all of his friends, those the Black boys, really come out of the East Coast and have a life. But they all moved to Winnipeg, which is the center of the country. And they were all people that I grew up with. It was one white mother and then a bunch of Black people screaming with laughter, so loud and hilarious and yelling over each other that I just thought, “Is this what life is really like?” And I could realize it was not. But the joy of that, and it happens whenever I'm with a group of Black people where you go, “Right, where's this on stage?”

**[00:45:07] – Dian:** Yes, yes.

**[00:45:08] – Thom:** Because if we're going to go from this, we're going to say... (laughing)

**[00:45:11] – Dian:** We also talk about programming, right? Like who's programming the stories?

**[00:45:16] – Thom:** Right.

**[00:45:17] – Dian:** Right? And um, to be able to read that and actually see what it is, recognize that you're actually putting in an invitation to a specific community that you are not familiar with, you know? I think about— um I was the assistant director on *'da Kink in My Hair* when it went to the Mirvishes.

**[00:45:35] – Thom:** Oh wow.

**[00:45:35] – Dian:** And that room was like (audience member's shoes clacking on the floor) 14 black women, and we do check-ins way back before check-ins were a thing. And uh it was a space that was held for that experience. And then we went to the Mirvish Theatre, load-in. They didn't even so much as give us a tour of the theatre. To like show us where the washrooms were. And so d'bi (chuckling), d'bi and Ngozi, the next day, came in with a bottle of rum and some sage, and lit the sage and the rum and everybody gathered and started running through the halls of that place, throwing rum in corners and smoking the place out. (others laughing) Because we were like, “We're here for the next six weeks. It's ours.” And then that theatre ended up having to extend that show five times.

**[00:46:21] – Thom:** I remember hearing about that. It wouldn't stop. It was so popular

**[00:46:24] – Dian:** It wouldn't stop. It was so popular. It wouldn't stop. And even now, 20 years later, they had a remount of it because it was just so popular. And you can say the aesthetics of it, “Well, it's not a traditionally well-made play, or...” it's like the function of it, though. What it did in the community

was not only center Black voices, but also bringing honesty to those experiences that we don't necessarily always get to see, right? Yeah. Um, yeah! I'm going to go to some of the questions or some of the topics that we talked about a couple of days ago. Um, uh, the idea of um... looking for your friends in the theatre and paying it forward in community. So, us as people, uh, who've been in the industry for, I would say, 15, 20, 30 years, um and the idea of the um, shift that we've seen. When I first started, um I was not seeing multiple people like myself, but also the language and what I felt I was allowed to say and the places I felt like I would be welcome to work always changed. And now that we're seeing people having a whole different understanding of their position in society and what they can say and what their rights are, and that sort of thing, that has shifted a huge amount for me. Um, and I'm really excited to see this next generation say, "No, I'm getting triggered," or "No, I'm—," just putting down really clear boundaries. Whereas before, we would just shut up or we would lose the job, right? And now being the people who are in the position to actually influence and make decisions and hire people, that idea of paying it forward and opening doors or leaving cracks in doors but behind us is something that I would love to have a conversation about and see like what your perspective on that is.

**[00:48:26] – Kym:** (clears throat) I always believe that whatever I do and whatever footsteps I lay for the next person to come and follow. Um, when I started doing my company, Madpoetix Productions, it was about, it was about showcasing other artists and giving them a platform. Um, and I started in 2007, and it was at first, we just doing erotic poetry shows because we were thinking money and sex sells. (others chuckling) And then in 2011, because I didn't— one of the things that I didn't like about spoken word shows is it was very typical and very formulaic, but basic formulaic and I felt like there needed to be a bit of pizzazz. There needed to be an energy that wasn't there for me. And so in 2011, on uh, well it was February 11th, 2011 or February 10th, I don't recall the exact date, a hip hop icon in Montreal was murdered, (audience member's shoes clacking on floor) truly murdered. And um, my partner at the time, because within the days that followed, everybody's putting up his picture and his video and everything like that. My partner at the time was like, "Kym, why do you wait until an artist has died in order to honor them?" And that has stuck with me ever since. And, um, I created the Madpoetix Open Mic Night, which was specifically to honor Montreal artists first, and then all the other artists are also welcome. (crinkling sounds) But I would talk outside of the year at least 10 Montreal artists. And I was very, very, um... I was stringent that at least half of the artists that I'm showcasing, the features I mean, because I can't control the open mic-ers, the features had to be women. I was very like, this is how... this is how we're going to be doing it. And for me, it's always about paying it forward and giving, giving people platforms. I've like watched artists grow from trembling behind their little paper to now touring—

**[00:50:58] – Dian:** Mmm.

**[00:50:58] – Kym:** touring Canada. One of, one of the artists, I'm sure you'll know him if you don't know him yet, his name is Svens Telemaque. He, he started up his own program called Broken Crayons Still

Color. He's formerly incarcerated, but he started doing poetry at my show. And now he tours, and he's toured, I think, Africa, the States, and Canada. He goes to prisons and does workshops there. And all of these artists are doing amazing things now. And I, you know, have myself here (others laughing) because even if I'm not the only one, it was a spot that people know. When you come to Madpoetix, it's not only you're getting— you're going to learn, you're going to find out about different artists. And we had everything. We had, um, pieces of plays. Like, we'd have people come and do pieces of plays. We had Tristan D. Lalla, and he did a Shakespeare monologue for his feature. You know like, just because it was an open mic night, it didn't mean that, (mimicking a posh British accent) "Oh, it's only you're going to be hearing poetry really well-spoken." (speaking regularly) No, it was anybody who wanted to get up on that. The only rules were you have five minutes, you got one minute grace, you go over that, we're taking you off the stage. (others chuckling) That's it, because I wanted to keep the show (snapping) rolling and sometimes, poets can get a bit boring. But it's always about giving, giving space. And later on down the line, I created a show called The Phenomenal 5IVE because I was listening to Black women, and Black women were saying, "Black men don't have our back, Black men don't love us," all of that stuff. And I was like, "Okay. Here's a show." So we showcased five black women from Montreal, different disciplines, whether it's singing, poetry. We have um, Elena Stoodley, that, uh, that she's been on the show multiple times, and it went from being a one-night show to a full theatrical production with two weeks of rehearsal. We had to like get everybody's pieces, blend them all together into a play, figure out the themes of the different pieces, put them together. And we had like a five night from Wednesday to Sunday, full production, you know. And always with the idea of giving space. Like, how are we going to make way for these artists? And no ageism either, because, you know, some artists come to the theatre or come to the page at a much later time in life. So we had all kinds of people passing through. For me, it's so important because, like, what is the legacy that you want people to be saying about you? My father said something, um, a few months before he passed. He said, "Kym, you need to be the author of your own narrative. And the only way that you can write your narrative is by the actions that you take. Because it doesn't matter what you say, it's what you do that has a lasting impact on people's lives," so yeah.

**[00:54:25] – Dian:** Do you feel it's your responsibility to, you know, speak people, like to talk people up or offer opportunity to people or...?

**[00:54:34] – Thom:** Oh, yeah, for sure. Oh, sorry. For sure, especially in the position as director, I'm always going to be casting— I'm aware that if I showcase some wonderful actor of colour, they get seen by people and go, "Oh, you can do that." And then after that they get that a chance to do something before and go, "Oh, aren't they wonderful? I didn't realize you could do that." Well, when did they get the chance to? I'm always aware and thrilled when I have a chance to go, "They're amazing. Let's do this part and let them get seen everyone with what they can actually do." So I'm aware of that all the time now, yeah.

**[00:55:04] – Dian:** Yeah, absolutely. Um, Neema, for yourself, uh do you find that you have the ability to open doors for folks or...?

**[00:55:13] – Neema:** I don't know. I have maybe a couple of thoughts on that. Um, I think just by doing helps to open the door. It's like the action that you're speaking of. Just doing the action shows that it's possible. Oh my goodness. But also um, I mean I don't—, so for example, the AMY Project, um which is an organization that, it stands for Artists Mentoring Youth. And so you know, to just be a part of things like that, that's something I can do and have done. I was thinking this past spring for, um, *Treemonisha* by Scott Joplin. Um, I was a part of this production since it started, and about a decade ago. It's a reimaged, reworked version of his original piece. And um, so leading up to the production, um there's outreach often that happens for shows, um, hopefully. And so for this one, there was not by me, but um outreach that happened to um Black communities for children and choirs and musicians. Um, and they were then invited to the first preview. And so it was an audience full of students from age, I think, uh, like seven to high school. Um and the production is all Black people on stage. The orchestra was also on stage, and people of colour, mostly people of colour, mostly Black, and then all the actors as well. And, um, and at some point, one of the main characters gets shot and is dying on stage and after he dies, the community that lived in the woods comes out to sing a song of morning for him. And the children had learned the song, and they just started singing.

**[00:57:43] – Thom:** Oh, you're caught!

**[00:57:44] – Neema:** It was so gorgeous. It was so beautiful. You've got these professionals who are amazing on stage singing this old spiritual. It wasn't a Scott Joplin song. It was just a song from that time period. And they're, you know, in harmony singing this spiritual and then you have these angel voices in the second and third row also singing blessings on this moment and that was just everything. It was just like all of it coming together in that moment. It was so gorgeous. And, and so I think of that. You do the outreach and you think, “Eh, okay, we did it. We talked to the kids. Hopefully, they heard us. (others laughing) Whatever.” And then they basically star in the show and like carry that moment. It was just like, “Yeah, this is... yeah this is why.”

**[00:58:42] – Thom:** The idea of storytelling, writing plays, collecting ourselves, our own experience, whatever it is that takes us there. There's such a sense of any play, any line performance, or whether it's art or an installation like that, or it's a scene being done or it's a feeling, it, it just feels like it's all about trying to connect the world, to ourselves as human beings. That everyone, every culture is just other human beings with different backgrounds, trying to express what it feels like to be a human being, to be in their own bodies, to be in your bodies, to be in that body. What's that body? What's that life experience like? The whole #MeToo, I mean, the whole that yes, the whole um Black Lives Matter movement, about bringing awareness to these human bodies have not had the same experience, but they're still human bodies. I feel like, “Oh, oh! The beauty, the laughter, the darkness, the trauma.” It's all to go, “This is our experience. Can you listen to this with empathy and sympathy and open up to the

idea that we're so much closer than we think we are to each other?" I wanted to be expressing just a whole other culture's world, but it's amazing how when people start to come out, audiences come out, see themselves, see each other. In the dream world, is to actually kind of go, there are no barriers other than what we put in our minds. There's humanity.

**[01:00:02] – Dian:** It's an invitation.

**[01:00:04] – Thom:** Yeah.

**[01:00:04] – Dian:** Treating it as an invitation, um, and a testimony.

**[01:00:09] – Thom:** Right.

**[01:00:09] – Dian:** You know? Yeah. And when you get specific like that, you become universal. Absolutely.

**[01:00:14] – Thom:** That's it. (others agreeing)

**[01:00:16] – Dian:** Yeah. Um, I wanted to ask about the idea of, uh, where we are right now and just that conversation around, um, the perceived... the perception that we're getting opportunities that other people aren't getting and that we're kind of lucky to be in the situations that we're in or, um, that we're opportunists, that we're being opportunistic in this current time of change.

**[01:00:48] – Thom:** Right.

**[01:00:49] – Dian:** If there's a backlash to that, what the feeling is in terms of how we're moving forward and how we're moving through this recent civil unrest and reflection on how the world is changing, yeah. I think for myself, I know, especially during the 2020 beginning of the pandemic, um, one of the things that happened to me (chuckling) was that all of a sudden I was getting job offers. (Thom chuckling) Like, I was getting emails saying, "Hey, I'm stepping down from the artistic director position at this organization. You want it?" you know? Whereas the year before, I couldn't even— like, I was cobbling together my existence. And um, people were, like, literally handing jobs to me that honestly were like, here's a two-week contract or here's a job and we're going to pay you minimum wage. But still, it was not for— it was kind of like, my feeling was um, who are the good Black people that we've been ignoring, that we had been on the back burner. Moving into my position at Luminato, I felt very fortunate to be there. Um, but at the same time, I know that the perception was by some that I was kind of handed this thing and didn't really have to work for it. And yeah, I just want to talk about that. I'll share a little bit.

**[01:02:19] – Kym:** I don't know if this is just because I grew up as a man, a cisgender man. When I see, (machine humming) when I hear people talking about, "Oh, you're only getting this because you're Black." So? You know? Because (chuckling) you've been getting stuff because you were white before. You know, the chickens have come home to roost! (Thom laughing) We are reaping what we have sowed for over 500 years. So? You know, um I personally don't really feel that? Because, um, like for example, there are folks that are saying that we're getting a lot more grants now. Um, like and I got a grant for *#DearBlackMan*, and I don't think I got the grant because it's a Black play. And, you know, we



had, we had um all of the various huge incidents that happened. I don't think it's possible. Maybe in the minds of the, the people in charge of funding, maybe in their minds, but I know the quality of my work. I know the strengths of my work. Um, all of us that have gotten grants and gotten positions and gotten stuff, yes, maybe the white people them said, "Oh, we need to put a Black person in the role." But they didn't put any person in the role. They didn't give any Black person a grant. They gave it to very powerful, very deserving, very hardworking Black people. And if anybody else have something to say about it, them can (continuing in Jamaican patois). (Others laughing) I've been working in the industry for 25 years! I don't need you to tell me that, "Oh, I got it because I'm Black." And what? Okay, wha-wha-what's your argument? That's the argument? Okay, well, we don't have to talk because that's not an argument. You can't take that to court. You can't take that cheque to the bank and cash it.

**[01:04:41] – Dian:** And can you talk about the inverse that I didn't get it because that was Black before?

**[01:04:44] – Kym:** Yeah, please. Thank you.

**[01:04:46] – Neema:** It's like, "Oh, you're just getting this because you're a woman."

**[01:04:50] – Thom:** Right, yeah

**[01:04:50] – Neema:** It was that time period. Now, "Oh you're just getting this because you're Black. You're so lucky, you're so lucky." But I also kind of feel like that has happened as an artist? Maybe as a singer, too. "You are so lucky that you get to... sing all day." Like, as if—

**[01:05:08] – Thom:** Yes, yeah.

**[01:05:08] – Neema:** we're just (laughing) not working. (Thom exclaiming) There's joy in my work. Yeah, there's love in my work. But it's work.

**[01:05:16] – Kym:** (overlapping) As if you're not probably doing like 15 different things—

**[01:05:19] – Neema:** Exactly! (laughing)

**[01:05:20] – Kym:** outside of singing. (others laughing) Exactly. Because let me tell you something, since 2000, 2005, I haven't had less than three jobs until the pandemic hit, and now I'm back up to four jobs, so you know like—

**[01:05:34] – Neema:** That's just a part of it, right? Being an artist is being a lot of things.

**[01:05:37] – Kym:** Yeah.

**[01:05:38] – Neema:** It's work. And so yeah the, "You're so lucky." It's... like as soon as someone says that, just stop. (laughing)

**[01:05:48] – Kym:** I agree! Don't talk to me because you don't know what's going on behind the scenes. You don't know the work that I'm putting in. Like, you don't know the nights that I'm up until three, four o'clock in the morning, stressing because tickets haven't started selling yet. Or you know, like you don't know what... "practice judo." You don't know what I do. You don't know! (all laughing)

**[01:06:10] – Audience Member:** But there are two things that are in the forefront of my mind. One is about imagining or incorporating stories that are specifically rooted in Black Canadian experiences and then Black diaspora experiences. And the immigrant experience is how you bridge those two. But um,

just thinking, or wondering if we can meditate a little bit about how the diaspora shows up in working in this context?

**[01:06:44] – Dian:** Okay, just for the recording, how the diaspora— diasporic experience shows up in the context of creating new work?

**[01:06:53] – Audience Member:** Mhmm, mhmm.

**[01:06:55] – Dian:** I think that's super interesting. So, one of the things, and other people could jump in on this as well, but one of the things I've been seeing in terms of just reading plays, submissions that, uh, have been coming in, is this uh very recent, like I would say within the last 5, 10 years, um reference to ancestral practices.

**[01:07:16] – Audience Member:** Mmm.

**[01:07:16] – Dian:** So lots of references to, um, Hoodoo or spirituality or like talking to, to grandmothers that have passed, that sort of thing. And it's, it almost feels like people caught a wave. And I know in the piece I'm writing, I'm doing the same thing. Um but the fact that I've seen it over and over and over again, which is really lovely, um is interesting. Um and just that idea of ritual and reinterpreting ritual and broken ritual, that people still feel that need to connect to this way of doing things, even though the understanding of why we're doing it or how we're doing it is fractured, but that, that there's a need for it. So it's just like rituals of like birthdays. Like, we need to sing a song. There needs to be fire. (all laughing) There needs to be food, you know? Those are ritualistic elements, right? Um, but we're breaking them in a certain way. Um, and here in Canada versus in, in other diaspora communities. Yeah, it's an interesting thing that's happening globally and like an understanding of a lan— like an unspoken language. People need them to recognize fractures of themselves in other cultures. It's really interesting. Yeah. Yeah, Kym?

**[01:08:40] – Kym:** Yeah. We did that with *Blackout*. Um, we incorporated Yoruba into *Blackout*, and we had no idea if anybody was a practitioner or anything like that. Um, but that was very important to to us in the thinking of Shango and Ogun, who are the two warriors in terms of the two main warriors that are known in terms of the Yoruba pantheon. So yes, and— but when I think about the play that I'm writing and how me, as a diaspora Jamaican and Haitian shows up in that world, because it's a Canadian piece, it's set here in Montreal, and how I bring the culture into it is language. Because one of the things I love about us as Black people is like there's always a diff— Even if we're all speaking English, there's a different English language in every single country. There is different, as we like to say, code switching that has to happen. When you have (with his Jamaican accent) Jamaican patois and the white people dem come inna de room, (with his Canadian accent) you have to turn into an— (with a posh British accent) you have to start speaking English for (laughing) (with his Jamaican accent) the white people. (continuing with Canadian accent) But then I think about like going to the States, and I love listening to the different English language in the different states. The further south you get, the further east, the further west, depending on where you are, there's just a rhythm to the, to the way that people that I, I

love. I try and bring the Jamaican and the Haitian into the play because I want for... if there's a— even if it's not a Jamaican person, but a Caribbean person sitting down in the audience and they're like, “Oh, that's my mother, that's my father, that's my little brother,” you know? I want that connection there with the textures of how it rolls off. You're telling me, so even if it's somebody who's Trinidadian, they can still to jump into that role, it doesn't matter. Um, so for me, language is, is huge because I also haven't seen it. I haven't seen a play that incorporates French and English, which is Montreal. Like I, I tell everybody, “This play is Montreal.” You're going to turn a corner and some, one— two people are standing up. One person is speaking French, the other person is speaking English, and they don't skip a beat. They don't even ask the other one, “What did you say?” It's, just like continues, like flawlessly. And I think that's something that hasn't been captured in theatre. At least I haven't seen it, if it has been already.

**[01:11:41] – Neema:** I don't— I, I think that's interesting, your thoughts, non-question. Musing, musing. (others overlapping) I'm totally also like, I don't really have anything— I wanted the microphone, but I don't really have anything to say. (Dian laughing)

**[01:11:57] – Thom:** Muse away, meditate away.

**[01:11:58] – Neema:** Muse, muse, muse. Like I don't know. Three years ago, I finished writing, this is maybe the only thing I actually wrote down on paper type of show, oppose to devise or recreate. Um, and because I'm from Alberta, the character— the play took place in Alberta. So, the character was, um, a woman who worked in the salt mines up north, or sand, the oil sands. Why did I go to salt mines I wonder, I'm like (laughing), anyways, anyways.

**[01:12:35] – Thom:** (unintelligible) in her tears.

**[01:12:35] – Neema:** My character worked in the oil sands up north where they had these like trucks that are the size of this room, digging for oil. And that was her job, was driving a truck, and she loved it so much. And I remember people being like, “Whoa, it's like, I never imagined someone like you, um, being a character like that.” And it was like, “Oh, but that's so Alberta.” That's so, to me— so Canadian, you know, in a sense. That's a story that comes from a specific place here.

**[01:13:17] – Thom:** “Well it's not what we would expect.” I just saw, I think, a reality show of some kind, I forget what it was, it would be a cooking show. Um, and it was in the UK, where there was an Asian woman who had full, thick Scottish brogue. And it took me a while to go, I can't even think of the sounds, the generic sounds, the detail of all, a little um, um, shire of England. But I was going, “I can't place what sound is.” I knew the Scottish stuff, but I couldn't put it on her. It's not what you think is going to happen. So the story that happens just from someone's accent, where they come from, that we just don't put them in that place or that world is always fascinating, too, because you've got to get used to your perception of what's possible, it suddenly goes— that challenges me, kind of the dog going (imitating a questioning dog sound). So you can figure out what's happening and what that tells you. And I have a whole expectation of what they might be. Suddenly you're going, I have no point of

reference in terms of knowing who that person is or what that is in the world. When you realize how little you do know about what someone might be, where they're from, or what they're bringing to the table, now it becomes an interesting storytelling. So when you change the sound of someone, something will go, I don't know what your story might even... I can't imagine what that experience would be, which is interesting.

**[01:14:27] – Dian:** Yeah. Just the idea, too, that we come with pre-conceived notions of what people's stories are, right?

**[01:14:34] – Thom:** Yeah.

**[01:14:34] – Dian:** If, if I hear a Black person speaking with a British accent, all of a sudden my brain goes, "You're a Nigerian. You're uh, you have a higher education. You're probably a lawyer or you're a politician." Like, there's an entire back story.

**[01:14:49] – Thom:** Yes.

**[01:14:50] – Dian:** But if you hear, um, if you like you said, Asian woman with a brogue.

**[01:14:56] – Thom:** What does that mean? I don't know. Economically or life experience, I have no idea what your life would be. Nothing to you.

**[01:15:03] – Dian:** Yeah, yeah. And depending on the kind of accent, you can place upper class, lower class, you know where— geographically where they are. In Canada, it's a little bit more difficult, but like I can tell an Albertian accent versus an Ontario or Scotian accent, or like you know that sort of thing. And yeah, that's a really interesting, interesting point as well. Yeah. And how much we assume we know about a character based on what they look like or who they are or— and how, what an opportunity is to mess with people, but mess with story or, or how part of the story already filled in.

**[01:15:39] – Thom:** Yes.

**[01:15:40] – Dian:** Know? Like three characters walk into a bar. One is this, one is that, one is that. Half of the story is told, already. You know what they come with. Right? Yeah.

**[01:15:50] – Thom:** Right. But we have an Irishman, a Jewish man— an Irishman, Jewish, hold on— an Irish, Jewish, and Ugandan, and they're all Black.

**[01:15:59] – Dian:** Yeah!

**[01:15:59] – Thom:** So you go (mimics explosion) I don't know what to think of anything! You know like— But it's amazing. That changes your whole— then your whole experience of the story you're about to hear, the story of what you're watching goes I— it's an adventure. I don't know what this is now.

**[01:16:13] – Neema:** That's a great start to a show.

**[01:16:16] – Thom:** (overlapping) Right there! I said it first. (Neema laughing) No, anyway, take it. Now I want to know what that story is.

**[01:16:21] – Dian:** You know, it's so funny. I've always wanted to direct a version of *Othello* with everybody, your complexion. Cause— [Thom has a medium-light brown skin tone]

**[01:16:30] – Thom:** Is Othello also or is he darker skin?

[01:16:32] – Dian: No, no, Othello is also, but they're Italian and he's African.

[01:16:35] – Thom: They— when I was in theatre school, I did a scene where I was playing Iago and our Othello was Indigenous. I just thought, “What's that?” I always thought in the back of my mind, what if that's a world that everyone's black except for Othello is actually Indigenous or Chinese or something. Like just that, the other, it's just an other that doesn't belong.

[01:16:53] – Dian: Yeah.

[01:16:53] – Thom: It's fascinating. But the whole colourism thing is a whole thing that's interesting, too, and how that becomes the layer of that in a story like that, where you're not so other, but you're other enough that we decide you're something else, the judgement.

[01:17:04] – Dian: I know. I know. But I also think about the Italian um population, closer to the, to the tip of Africa—

[01:17:11] – Thom: Right

[01:17:12] – Dian: you can barely tell. Well, that's politica.

[01:17:15] – Thom: (laughing) But there's a sense of it's a darker world than the moor is, how dark is he really?

[01:17:23] – Dian: How dark is he really? Yeah, yeah, and then the topic becomes like is racism a backdrop for something that's even much more insidious because Portia is 14.

[01:17:38] – Thom: Right.

[01:17:38] – Dian: Right? (tongue pop)

[01:17:40] – Neema: Wow. (imitating sad trombone)

[01:17:41] – Dian: And he's what, 45?

[01:17:43] – Thom: It's like is it still that— Yeah. Is that the issue or is it something else?

[01:17:46] – Dian: (all overlapping) That begins the conversation.

[01:17:48] – Thom: That's interesting.

[01:17:49] – Dian: That's really interesting. Don't steal it.

[01:17:53] – Thom: That's the conversation— That's a great conversation, bigger picture, too. In Angel in America, with Roy Cohen, was it? He talks about how, how in his world, being gay, is a— it's financial? It's, it's money-based, not actually (stammering) homophobic-based. There's a whole speech he has, it's like, that's fascinating that it's about, it's about um...

[01:18:23] – Kym: Economics.

[01:18:23] – Thom: Yeah, thank you. Economics, not homophobia, the way it places you somewhere. I'm gay, but I've got money, then it doesn't matter.

[01:18:30] – Dian: Yes!

[01:18:31] – Thom: Because I'm rich enough that becomes secondary. I just went, (mimics sound of explosion).

[01:18:35] – Dian: Classism.

[01:18:35] – **Thom:** Yeah! It's amaz— the, the subcategories and the layering and the— we call that (unintelligible) um, the inter— interconnectivity of everything. It's a whole— yeah, all of that world. It's always what is— what's in play in this moment—

[01:18:51] – **Dian:** Yes.

[01:18:51] – **Thom:** becomes the question, not what's always the issue. I think there's layers of what the issue can be depending on the people, the— the circle, who's watching, who is involved, you know.

[01:19:01] – **Dian:** And that's when theatre's a conversation, right? With the audience and not just people presenting. Yeah. (sounds of agreement from others)

[01:19:07] – **Thom:** This is our thoughts. This is the thoughts you thought they were.

[01:19:09] – **Dian:** Yeah.

[01:19:10] – **Audience Member:** I'm wondering in your capacities as producers and directors, um have you had a moment where you decided, I'm going to bring— bring this Black playwright's work into this white space and, and see what happens in that capacity? Like the kind of— not to I think about you know “what is the work that white people need to do,” but just what does it mean to bring— bring Black theatre into spaces where there's maybe only one Black actor in the room, and you and that one Black actor are like, “Huh! We doing it for us.” But you know, you're in a context where there are other white people that are asked to enter Black stories. Have you had that experience? Do you have thoughts about what that might require?

[01:19:55] – **Dian:** This might not be, and it's definitely not connected to playwriting or even directing, but creative directing. So I was at the Luminato Festival, and one of the programs that I ran was an Artist-in-Residence program. And I, specifically the first year, because it was 2020, um was like, this has to be a Black space, and it has to be a safe space for these artists. And I found myself insulating. I found myself being like, “Yes, you can have access to them, but we're not doing any marketing.” This is not going to be Luminato all of a sudden is saving these 10 Black artists. This is going to be offering them resource and space and time and commun— community so that they can meet together. I feel like my work was about holding space for people within the resources of this organization and not necessarily... Yeah, there was a lot of offering happening. I found that.

[01:20:59] – **Kym:** So, um back to me. *#DearBlackMan*, again, I strategically am writing it in French and in English because we're in a French province, and there's this beautiful thing called “surtitling”, not “subtitling”, sub is down, “surtitling”. I anticipate that because even though there are Black theatre companies in French, they're not as big and not as well-funded, um as the white theatre companies and when I found out like the amount of time that white theatre companies spent rehearsing, it's like triple the time that uh just English, whether it's white, Black, or anything takes time. Like, with an English company, you might have six weeks—

[01:21:54] – **Dian:** Yeah.

[01:21:54] – **Thom:** You're kidding!

**[01:21:54] – Kym:** with the French companies, you're talking 12 to 18 weeks of rehearsal. It's insane. I was just like, I need this play to get into all of them Frenchy spaces, (Thom laughing) and we'll get a grant to do the surtitles and have it translated into French and blah, blah, blah. Um, but that has been at the forefront of my mind because I'm like, this is a story that's a Montreal story. It just happens that all the characters are black, and you all white motherfuckers— excuse my language, sorry. Don't, don't say what I say. Um, y'all white people need to hear these stories. And so that is definitely something that I'm like, I'm definitely going to be like, oh, blackety, black, black, black, black, black, black.

**[01:22:45] – Dian:** I am so sorry. I'm just very conscious of the time, and I think we're wrapping up. But um I wanted to say like a very big thank you to you for coming out. A huge thank you to Thom, Kym, and Neema for being part of this conversation. I really love it, um and uh I hope that we can continue this uh format moving forward. Yeah. Well, thank you again. And um for those of you watching, please feel free to check us out, check out the rest of Club Zed. The programming is available on the website at [blacktheatreworkshop.ca](http://blacktheatreworkshop.ca). Thank you.

**[01:23:22] – Thom:** Thank you.

**[01:23:23] – Kym:** Great.

**[01:23:25] – Neema:** Yeah!

**[01:23:26] – [Club Zed musical intro]**