

Black Theatre Workshop's La Parole

Episode 1 – Setting the Stage

Welcome to La Parole with Musical Guest Kunle and a Reading of Lorena Gayle's Iconic "Je Me Souviens"

Featuring Dian Marie Bridge (Dian), Lydie Dubuisson (Lydie), and Kunle

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

[00:00:26] – **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.

[00:00:50] – [Theme music continues]

[00:00:56] – **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 profonde 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.

[00:02:21] – **Dian:** Welcome, everybody. We're really, really excited for you to join us for Black Theatre Workshop's very first podcast. And my name is Diane Marie Bridge. I'm the current Artistic Director at Black Theatre Workshop. How did we get here?

[00:02:37] – **Lydie:** I didn't know you were natural radio host like that. Or host.

[00:02:40] – **Dian:** Hilarious. Hilarious. I'm joined today by my Associate Artistic – Associate Artist, Lydie Dubuisson.

[00:02:49] – **Lydie:** Well, hello.

[00:02:51] – **Dian:** Hello, Lydie.

[00:02:52] – **Lydie:** Look at us. We're doing a podcast.

[00:02:54] – **Dian:** Fantastic. So, Lydie, this podcast is titled La Parole, and I wanted to ask you to help us pull that apart a little bit, just to examine the title a little bit?

[00:03:10] – **Lydie:** Well, yes. Like, aren't we in Montreal?

[00:03:14] – Dian: Yeah, absolutely.

[00:03:15] – Lydie: And Montreal, whoever says Montreal has to say "Montréal" so since we're in this city where the brain has to work in two languages. La Parole for Black Theatre Workshop, we just merged the two. So the Black Theatre Workshop presents La Parole. And it's weird because translation, right? La Parole, the word, but also taking space so you can say your words yeah, I think we knew what we were doing by picking La Parole.

[00:03:50] – Dian: And there's a colloquial twist to it as well in terms of, like, its connection to, I believe we were talking about connection to –

[00:03:59] - Lydie: the religious. Also connotations in French, "La parole" is very much associated to the word of God. And actually, we can hear it also in English, but I guess that in French, um I grew up in evangelical family, so I know that Baptist churches, evangelical churches in French have adopted "la parole" as just "la parole" in itself contains the word of God. You don't even have to say the word.

[00:04:22] – Dian: The word.

[00:04:28] – Lydie: So that's how I grew up. I remember my mom had a song, a book, a book of songs –

[00:04:38] – Dian: Hymnals yeah.

[00:04:39] – Lydie: Life of artists. I slept at 02:00 a.m. So a book of songs, book of hymns. And it was called "la parole". And there's usually a dove next to it.

[00:04:49] – Dian: Yes.

[00:04:50] – Lydie: So, yeah, it's two words that carry a lot of weight, I find in French, and that have a lot of power also. Not just spiritually, but in everything that it can mean politically, socially.

[00:05:04] – Dian: Fantastic. And on top of that, one of the reasons why we call this podcast La Parole is mainly because we want to engage the theatre community in talk, in spreading the word, not only about Black Theatre Workshop and the productions that we do, but about the artists that live here. I am, as a lot of people know, a transplant from Toronto. I just started in September. And one of the things that I really just absolutely love about this city is the connection to the arts community and the way arts functions in everybody's lives. People have it woven into how they live in this city. Music, festivals, theatre, dance. But also the understanding of language takes - language takes up such a different role in Quebec and particularly Montreal. And I mean, even beyond the French-English conversation, we're talking about folks who have three, four, five languages, who operate in all those languages. And as somebody who grew up learning French through the Ontario school system, I think I can get along. I can say my "merci's" –

[00:06:23] – Lydie: Non, non c'est pas vrais, c'est pas vrais. Je t'ai entendu.

[00:06:28] – Dian: Ouais, mais ce pas ma première langue alors, anyways...

[00:06:35] – Lydie: That was me, like, moving my head, like, oh, sure, yeah, no, you're doing great.

[00:06:39] – Dian: But at the same time, I feel the synapses and the pathways forming when I'm in Montreal because I'm using different parts of my brain. And I just think that that's such a unique thing for this city, that people operate and function in multiple languages, not only English and French, but walking around, I hear –

[00:06:58] – Lydie: maternal languages, maternal languages are carried all over the city.

[00:07:01] – Dian: All over the city. And in that too, there's a conversation around who belongs here and who doesn't and who has the right to call themselves Quebecois or Quebecers or all of those things and how that plays out in terms of our understanding of art and what we want to say about that. And also, we're doing this podcast not only to have conversations like that, but we also want to talk about things about how the Black community connects to art and what the function of that art is.

[00:07:35] – Lydie: It's important for you to exactly do that, diving into the complexities of Montreal, because you have such an important role now as the Artistic Director of Black Theatre Workshop and getting to know all of this world, this environment, this ecosystem. So let's engage with this community and let's get to know how we live art in Montreal. Because it's true, like you just said, how we engage with it. I think that, like, we accept winter as it is. And still, you still have Festival en lumières, you still have a bunch of festivals to force people to go outside. But as soon as we hit the summer, it's like, which festival do you want to.

[00:08:21] – Dian: Oh, you're just living outside.

[00:08:23] – Lydie: We have to be outside. We have only those seven weeks.

[00:08:28] – Dian: When I was growing up, I remember a song that was colloquially, or known as, like the Quebec national anthem, which is "Ma pays ce pas mon pays, ce l'hiver..." (Lydie laughing)

[00:08:43] – Lydie: And it's true.

[00:08:44] – Dian: And I was like, wow...

[00:08:45] – Lydie: It's an anthem. Actually, I even met yesterday someone who is doing a conference on winter and how it's true, like the snow is one of the rare moments where community still comes together. That's the only time people on your street will talk to each other is when there's a snowstorm.

[00:09:01] – Dian: It's almost like survival instinct. Like when you go into the bush and you go camping.

[00:09:05] – Lydie: I need you.

[00:09:06] – Dian: You need me. You might be the last person to see me alive.

[00:09:10] – Lydie: "Mon pays ce pas mon pays, c'est l'hiver."

[00:09:12] – Dian: "C'est l'hiver." Just so everybody knows, we also have invited a musical guest to be with us a little bit later on and we'll –

[00:09:21] – Lydie: Can I say it?

[00:09:22] – Dian: Yes.

[00:09:23] – Lydie: Kunle!

[00:09:25] – Dian: So Kunle is a musician that we met earlier this season, I guess a few months ago. We took a trip to the Stratford Festival of Ontario to see the production of Death and the King's Horseman. I know it was fabulous.

[00:09:39] – Lydie: 2022 was a great year, but that trip to Stratford was everything.

[00:09:44] – Dian: It was an opportunity for Montreal Black artists to go see large scale Black theatre done with a budget and a half.

[00:09:56] – Lydie: We made it work.

[00:09:57] – Dian: And of a Nobel Prize winning author. Absolutely pivotal for so many people just to see what dreaming bigger about your work does. And Kunle was one of the performers in that piece, and he also had the opportunity to stop by the office at Black Theatre Workshop and pay us a visit, which was amazing. I know you weren't there, but it was a lot of fun. So we invited him to be our first guest today. Let's read a little bit about Kunle, his bio. Kunle is an acoustic guitarist and singer songwriter. Kunle's folk and soul music bridges contemporary styles with roots in West African rhythms and stories. Nigerian born and currently based in Toronto, Kunle brings together his rich vocals, guitar tapping, harmonica and talking drum to take audiences into what he terms music with no boundaries. Fantastic. And I did spend some time on his website and I was like, oh my goodness. Really beautiful, beautiful music.

[00:11:02] – Lydie: Of course!

[00:11:02] – Dian: I know.

[00:11:03] – Lydie: It was only excellence on that stage. He was part of that excellence. And talking drums. You had me at talking drums.

[00:11:11] – Dian: Yeah.

[00:11:12] – Lydie: Of course.

[00:11:13] – Dian: One of the things we wanted to also recognize is that being February, we are in Black History/Black Futures Month.

[00:11:21] – Lydie: Ohhh yes.

[00:11:23] – Dian: And we're also in le mois d'amour. (Lydie laughing)

[00:11:30] – Lydie: Oui, la mois de l'amour. Is it, though? (Dian laughing)

[00:11:33] – Dian: I think we're in the month of love, but we can also extrapolate on what love is. Not just romantic love like the greeting card companies want to have us focus on, but just the idea of self love, community love, or your love of practice, your love of arts. And we've invited Kunle here to talk about how he feels about his music, his theatre practice, what he understands about the idea of community love and giving back to community as well.

[00:12:07] – Lydie: And community love, I think. I hope it's going to become a term that we hear more and more because it's so important to our community. It's so important to like Black Canadians wherever we are, our need for a community. And when you find that community, the love that you get to receive.

[00:12:28] – ["Amí n relé" by Kunle]

[00:13:14] – **Dian:** Yeah. So we're going to be talking to Kunle about his understanding of music and theatre and why he loves it. But our hope is to also talk about his connection to the Montreal community. I don't know how much time he spent here, but he did spend a bit of time in the fall. And we want to introduce this larger theatre community to this artist as well. And also, one of the things that was really interesting to me when I moved here is how geographically separated the Black communities are in Montreal. And the idea that Black Theatre Workshop, is one of the top two Black or ethnoculturally centered producing companies in Canada, yet we have large portions of the community here that don't know us or don't come to our shows. Alors –

[00:14:11] – **Lydie:** Like even myself, I found out about Black Theatre Workshop. I was mid twenties and I literally lived two corners away from Black Theatre Workshop for four years without knowing that they were there.

[00:14:23] – **Dian:** Ça c'est un problème, eh?

[00:14:24] – **Lydie:** Méchant problème. But I grew up on the south shore, so I don't even consider myself as part of all of these people in Montreal who still don't know about it. But even once you're on the island, to find that community and to find out where people are located. And it's really the way I see the different areas in the city are the highways, how the highways separate. And as soon as you are within the highways, you are in the city, you are on the Plateau, you are downtown. Even Hochelag' now is becoming its own kind of neighborhood, which used to be a space where low incomes could easily move into. But now gentrification has taken over that neighbourhood. But those are still within the highways. As soon as you move down the Ville Marie, you have Little Burgundy –

[00:15:16] – **Dian:** Little Burgundy.

[00:15:17] – **Lydie:** Which used to be part of the downtown area. But when everything started to be built in the 60's, the line just came and separated, right? That Atwater section, that was very rich, especially at the time. Like, you still had the coliseum where the games were happening, and the children's hospital, and everything was above the highway. But as soon as you cross, that's where, like, post that traffic, that's where you have the communities that build, like the Black communities that built Montreal, that were here. The porter, the families of the porters, the families of the entertainers. And again, the rich history of Little Burgundy, which reminds and helps a lot of Black Canadians understand, how do we land here in Montreal? Well, to know that a part of our history, it doesn't have to be your direct ancestry, but for me to just know that when we got scattered from the Atlantic, wherever we ended, some of us landed here, it's such an important part, it's important for us to know and that's something that we do not know. We don't know about Little Burgundy enough. And then you move to Décarie, within Décarie, Westmount, Outremont, those neighborhoods, and even NDG is crossed. But again, the communities that are more with the low income, the minorities, will move on the other side of the highway of the Décarie bridge.

[00:16:44] – Dian: So tell me, what's up with the west end? The West Isle, parce que ça c'est tellement – it's very connected to New York and that kind of feel. Well, when I was there, when I did an interview last week, it just feels like a very anglo focused community there.

[00:17:03] – Lydie: Well, again, see, we talk about Montreal. You have to find your safe spaces. So we have the intersectionality of finding your Blackness, finding your language. And as people are being pushed out of Little Burgundy, they're being pushed more into NDG, Côte-des-Neiges, Côte Saint-Luc, those areas where – and that has always been an anglophone area. It has always been. Westmount is one of the rare areas in Montreal where you still have English names, English street names, still have businesses where you walk in, and, well, I don't know how they're doing now, because it keeps moving, keeps happening. But 20 years ago, when I would hang out around in NDG, it's an anglophone area. You walk into a bar, you walk into a restaurant. It's just a "hi". You don't have to say bonjour, but –

[00:17:52] – Dian: "Bonjour, hi."

[00:17:53] – Lydie: "Bonjour, hi." Hey, my generation invented that. I am proud of "bonjour, hi." I am a call-centre baby.

[00:18:01] – Dian: Yeah. "Bonjour, hi." Oh, my goodness.

[00:18:06] – Lydie: Yeah so NDG, on Décarie area, it has always been predominantly anglophone. I think it's good. It's like it's part of the history of the island, and that's how you end up north. And that before you, close to NDG, on the north, once you pass la métropolitaine, la quarante, and that's what I'm noticing. Of course, we're not just all moving there, but the English, West Africans, a lot of West African immigrants, the families, a lot in that area, Vendôme, Côte Saint-Luc, that area is very rich, a lot of diversity. But again, it's always on the other side of the highway. As soon as you get, like, above Crémazie, you have your Montréal Nord. And the centre, like the north, it's Montréal. And then you have, what I find very funny, just along the water of Montreal, Montreal up north, completely north. Before you cross Laval, you have the rich immigrants just all along the water. So it's, of course, our Quebec like families that are Quebecois and so on, but a lot of the Egyptian doctors, Middle Eastern families, or even also African families, Black families that did well since the 80s. You'll go around that corner, that's where they'll be at. But there's a centre that once you move out of the highways, Anjou, I call it my rich nurses area where people could buy their condos in the 90s and then they invested in that area. So you really see where people went when they had opportunities. You could literally go around Montreal and just go, what's on the other side of the highways and see what are the communities that went and installed themselves.

[00:20:00] – Dian: Amazing. Amazing.

[00:20:01] – Lydie: And how do you navigate through those neighbourhoods ever since you got here?

[00:20:05] – Dian: So one of the things that I love to do in pretty much every city that I visit or that I spend time in is get to know the transit system really well. So early on, I think in the summer and in September, I just got a metro pass for a week and I just rode from one end of the green line to the

other. And then it's interesting because it's like I also bring my own understanding of what is "a safe neighbourhood" versus "a rich neighbourhood" or whatever. So I know I'm bringing my own personal bias into the situation, but at the same time, I did enjoy just trying to find things or just getting lost a little bit. I have ended up in neighbourhoods where I'm like, I don't even know where north is because you can't even see the mountain at that point.

[00:21:00] – Lydie: Okay, yes.

[00:21:01] – Dian: Yeah. And you just kind of look for water, I guess, just like, okay, am I north or south? And this is the river. Okay. I go the other way. It's true. I was also really fortunate when I was house hunting or apartment hunting that I had a friend who is born and raised Quebeceer who took me around and was, "ah, you're looking in this one specific neighbourhood. Let's take you over the mountain." And so I was walking around Outremont and Rosemont, which I think one of my favourite new neighbourhoods is Mile-End –

[00:21:41] – Lydie: That was my first neighbourhood!

[00:21:44] – Dian: It just feels so, uh, communal and like, yeah.

[00:21:49] – Lydie: It is.

[00:21:50] – Dian: Vibing, vibing Mile-End.

[00:21:53] – Lydie: When I leave Montreal, that's the Montreal I miss.

[00:21:56] – Dian: Yeah,

[00:21:57] – Lydie: That's the Montreal that I like to go to.

[00:21:59] – Dian: I'm looking forward to the summer, though. I'm looking forward to actually spending more time out and about and getting a bike, right?

[00:22:05] – Lydie: It's your first summer!

[00:22:06] – Dian: It'll be my first summer.

[00:22:09] – Lydie: It's gonna be glorious. Maybe it's, I'm overexcited about it, but we're very proud of our summers.

[00:22:16] – Dian: Well, let's you and I talk about this a little bit, the conversations that we have about Black love and Black community love and Black theatre and understanding of Black stories. And we can loop Kunle into that when he is ready to join us. But tell me, Lydie, why are you a professional theatre artist? How did you get roped into this career?

[00:22:46] – Lydie: Kunle's on his way, we can't like, this is, but yeah actually. It's a good thing. I had a speech last night, so technically, I can actually make that whole thing very short. But I discovered having a reflection for that panel, why I do theatre is probably for a very selfish reason. I think I use theatre to decolonize myself. I use theatre to search my identity, question my identity, question myself. Um, I do have, I'm very impatient with people who don't tell stories well. Like, you know when you had such a good event happening and your friend wants to tell your other friends about it, and you were there and

they're not doing a good job telling the story, (Dian laughing) and you had to tell them, "You're ruining it!" And that's kind of when I realized, I think I do like telling stories. I think they need to be told well.

[00:23:43] – Dian: You are missing points. You forgot that whole thing. (Lydie laughing)

[00:23:46] – Lydie: But if you want your audience to understand your emotions of everything you went through, you have to lay it down well. And yeah that was one of the things that made me realize, yes, I love doing musical theatre. Yes, I love backstage. I love the energy of rehearsals and that community that happens in rehearsal. I love rehearsals way more than show time –

[00:24:09] – Dian: Mmm.

[00:24:09] – Lydie: because that's when you make the discoveries, that's when you grow. That's when you actually have the great memories, and –

[00:24:16] – Dian: And you get to play. You get to play.

[00:24:19] – Lydie: You get to play. Like you, (stammering). A moment happens and like, was that good? Are we going to do this again like that play, that fun? But I use this for my own questioning. I think that if I would have been passionate more about music, I probably should have pursued that. But I realized that I don't have that passion for the beat as much as I have for stories. So I picked the stories for that.

[00:24:55] – Dian: I have a story to share.

[00:24:57] – Lydie: (whispering) Share.

[00:24:58] – Dian: So like your story about people telling stories well triggered a memory for me. And I remember being in kindergarten, and this is in Ontario, so North York, and the school, you would do assemblies. So all of the kindergarten through grade four students packed into a gym, and they brought these two storytellers in who were telling stories, um, from their recent trip to Jamaica. So they essentially took folktales from Jamaica, and they were retelling them to us. And, uh, they were not Jamaican, I will say that –

[00:25:34] – Lydie: Because you said "trip to Jamaica."

[00:25:36] – Dian: (laughing) Right. And so us, at five years old, sitting there, super excited to hear stories from our homeland you know? And the couple began to tell a story about the "dupa" and how scary the "dupa" is. And we all looked at each other and said, "what is a 'dupa'?" I don't know what a "dupa" is. What's a "dupa"? And then we looked at each other. There's probably myself, my sister, our friends, and we just went, "do they mean 'duppy'?" Do they mean "duppy"? Right. And so I just was like, no, we have to start telling our own stories. Even from that age, six years old, seven years old, it's like, no, they told it wrong.

[00:26:18] – Lydie: It's wrong. The whole story is ruined.

[00:26:20] – Dian: The whole thing is ruined. I don't even remember the rest of the story. I don't remember what story they told. I just remember thinking, "you got it wrong." You got it wrong from the go. And from that point on, I was just really into storytelling. Right. Writing stories about spiders that I find in my house. (Dian and Lydie laughing)

[00:26:39] – **Lydie:** But at least you understood there is power in what you're doing. So do it well.

[00:26:44] – **Dian:** Yes, yes.

[00:26:45] – **Lydie:** Somebody seize it.

[00:26:46] – **Dian:** Absolutely you know, one of the things I really appreciate about Montreal is its connection to theatre and the idea of storytelling here. Um, and some of the most experimental theatre I've seen comes out of Montreal –

[00:27:03] – **Lydie:** Oo, really?

[00:27:04] – **Dian:** Um, mainly, you know –

[00:27:07] – **Lydie:** FTA.

[00:27:08] – **Dian:** Uh, well, I was even thinking way back in the 90s, like Carbone 14 and the clown, clown physical theatre workshops.

[00:27:21] – **Lydie:** Oh, yeah.

[00:27:22] – **Dian:** Um, and what's the other one?

[00:27:24] – **Lydie:** Circus in Montreal, like we are supposed to be the capital of circus.

[00:27:29] – **Dian:** Yeah. And La La La Human Steps.

[00:27:31] – **Lydie:** I wasn't sure if I was going, I was like, la la la...

[00:27:34] – **Dian:** Yeah, La La La, yeah yeah. There's a lot of just physical theatre that really inspired me as a young person in the 90s. (Dian laughing)

[00:27:45] – **Lydie:** But you see, that image of exactly what we do in Quebec was one of the reasons why I felt like what I wanted to do was something different.

[00:27:57] – **Dian:** Mmm.

[00:27:58] – **Lydie:** Like I, I admire, like of course, La La La Human Steps. And you know about the reputation of Cirque du Soleil and you know about all the danse contemporaine is, like, really strong in Montreal and a lot of, I find that a lot of things, it's easy to go to fall into the avantgarde almost.

[00:28:14] – **Dian:** Mmm.

[00:28:14] – **Lydie:** But is it avantgarde or is it... But there's an aesthetic in Quebec that you wonder, what is my role in that aesthetic? Is that the only industry, is that the industry? And for me to do arts, to be on the stage, does it mean that I have to be that? And that can be sometimes very intimidating.

[00:28:39] – **Dian:** (hesitantly) Yes. Um, my understanding of art in general is usually that it is about a conversation. So whether that is between a person, – two people on stage or people on stage in an audience or a theatre company and a community, or even one genre to another, or one movement within a genre to the next movement that follows it, it's about a push and pull and a conversation between those things. I don't think anything happens in isolation, right? So when you have that avantgarde experimental work going on where people are, like, running around naked on stage with baby heads bobble -- you do love it, you do love it. Or like when I first saw (inaudible), where it's just like people were flying in through windows or you know, work that is just like making you sit in the

audience, and part of you wants to think about, how are they doing that? But at the same time, you want to stay in the dreamscape. Beautiful. What is your response to that? Because you're actually having a conversation with it, or do you want to have a response to that? Do you want to have that conversation, or do you want to start your own conversation over there? I think that's the question that we have to ask ourselves. And as a theatre company, Black Theatre Workshop has been trying to have conversations with a larger, increasingly larger audience, having started in you know the 1970s with very focused, anglo-focused community base. I've seen the company, under the various artistic directors and most recently under Quincy, expand to just have a national scope and start to talk to people on a national level around issues of Blackness and the politic of Black bodies and the politic of Black love –

[00:30:28] – Lydie: Yup.

[00:30:29] – Dian: – on stage. And that's what I would love to focus on during this episode as well, is just to talk about the Black body on stage and how we perceive it, depending on who's in the audience, you know?

[00:30:45] – Lydie: Oh key.

[00:30:47] – Dian: Yeah.

[00:30:48] – Lydie: Key element.

[00:30:49] – Dian: Yeah. Oh, our friend has changed up.

[00:30:52] – ["Amí n relé" by Kunle]

[00:32:00] – Dian: Hi Kunle!

[00:32:02] – Kunle: Hello!

[00:32:03] – Dian: So happy to have you with us. It's nice to see your face.

[00:32:07] – Kunle: Yeah, good to see you guys as well. Yeah. And I missed you the last time I was at the office for sure Lydie.

[00:32:15] – Lydie: I am so sorry that I missed your visit, but I keep the memories of the last time that we were together. It was such a great night. Such a great night.

[00:32:23] – Kunle: That was the best.

[00:32:24] – Lydie: I cannot wait for you to come back. But, ugh Stratford, mmh.

[00:32:29] – Kunle: Stratford is uh yeah, I should be doing one or two shows there this year, but not the theatre. I think I'm doing two forums. One of them is arranging, um, folk music from Nigeria and some part of West Africa into strings.

[00:32:46] – Dian: Oh, amazing.

[00:32:47] – Kunle: So I'll do a trio with guitar and piano. Uh, so that will be cello, viola, violin, guitar, vocals, and ,um, piano. And the second show is called "Where We All Meet". It's uh, I've been doing this, um I started in 2019, but was only able to do one show before. So I feature a flagship instrument from another culture other than West Africa. And the last time I did it, it was the gayageum, the Korean traditional harp instrument.

[00:33:16] – Dian: Oh yes, yeah!

[00:33:18] – Kunle: Yeah, so the whole point is to bring traditional and contemporary music from that side of the world, into my idea of contemporary music and my influence from where I'm from. So this time around, it will be the gayageum. The same instruments with, uh, Afro-Cuban rhythms.

[00:33:38] – Dian: Beautiful.

[00:33:39] – Kunle: Congas (clears throat) because they relate to the Yorubas. Then I'll bring songs from you know some of my compositions. So it will be bass, guitar, upright bass, same person, uh gayageum, guitar, piano and uh percussions.

[00:33:57] – Dian: Amaazing. Beautiful.

[00:33:59] – Lydie: The life of a musical genius. (All chuckle)

[00:34:03] – Dian: You have a really deep love of music.

[00:34:06] – Kunle: (laughs) Yup.

[00:34:06] – Dian: Can you tell us about your first experience with music?

[00:34:09] – Kunle: Uh, first experience with music has been my mom and my dad, actually. But she was a songwriter, writing for church for years, that's what I knew her as. Every Saturday I'm going to choir practice, and she's the one writing songs, for what, the songs they will sing on Sunday. She will write it on Saturday!

[00:34:30] – Dian: Wow.

[00:34:30] – Kunle: Like, how do you do it? (clears throat) For all my life, that's what I know. And, um yeah, my dad is a collector of records.

[00:34:38] – Dian: Amazing.

[00:34:39] – Kunle: Yeah, he's a collector –

[00:34:40] – Dian: Does he have a lot of rare, rare records?

[00:34:42] – Kunle: Oh, we do.

[00:34:42] – Dian: Like rare? Yeah.

[00:34:43] – Kunle: Yeah, we do. Except he's been selling them. I had to call him, I put a ban – “You cannot!” (laughs)

[00:34:53] – Lydie: Protect the precious, protect the precious.

[00:34:54] - Dian: Tell him to at least digitize them –

[00:34:56] - Kunle: Yeah?

[00:34:56] - Dian: Digitize them first before he sells them. He can put them – he can digitize them first before he sells them.

[00:35:01] – Kunle: Yeah, but I like the physical copy of it. I told him, "Don't do it again!" So my mom decided to pack everything and put it in the storage that he doesn't have access. (Lydie laughing)

[00:35:10] – Dian: Oh gosh.

[00:35:11] – Lydie: Protect the goods!

[00:35:12] – **Kunle:** And I paid him, I paid him for it.

[00:35:15] – **Dian:** Oh! (laughing)

[00:35:17] – **Kunle:** It's no more your property. It's mine now. (Lydie gasping and laughing)

[00:35:21] – **Lydie:** I don't know if that's how it works, especially with dad. (Dian laughing)

[00:35:25] – **Kunle:** I told him, but I knew he was going to touch it again, so I told my mom to go keep everything.

[00:35:30] – **Dian:** Oh my gosh.

[00:35:31] – **Kunle:** Hey, take it and go keep it. Yeah, but that was my access to music, but never as in terms of practicing. My access to learning a little bit about music was elementary school? Then a little bit, you know friends and the rest. But I was never really that one that anyone would think would go into music. It was – I had a background in engineering. I studied marine engineering.

[00:35:56] – **Dian:** Marine engineering!

[00:35:57] – **Kunle:** Yeah.

[00:35:58] – **Dian:** Amazing. Wow.

[00:36:00] – **Kunle:** I was on both for a while.

[00:36:02] – **Dian:** I always find it amazing. Like, artists who have a background in the sciences or the other humanities and how well they do in art, just because it's an appreciation that comes from a deep, deep love.

[00:36:15] – **Kunle:** Mmhm.

[00:36:16] – **Lydie:** It's a beautiful choice and it shows that – 'cause I feel sometimes, especially when you have a talent for science, when you have a talent for academia and careers that could be considered "serious", and I'm doing the quotes right now. Um, like, the choice of choosing theatre to choose the arts over engineering, it's just that actually, Kunle, what is that conversation like –

[00:36:45] – **Kunle:** It wasn't a pleasant –

[00:36:46] – **Lydie:** Like, to your family, that "I know I have that engineering thing going on, but... bada pow."

[00:36:54] – **Kunle:** Trust me, it wasn't a pleasant conversation at all. It wasn't easy. I had to move from Nigeria to Ghana. That was how I got to Ghana. My – so I graduated the engineering – the marine college in Nigeria and got employed by a company, and they sent me on training to Ghana. So that was the first time I had freedom with no watch of anybody close to home except my colleagues from work who's also known me to picking up guitar back in college, and also uh church choir. So they've already seen that. And, yeah, I play for their girlfriends when they are breaking up. Country music was what we do. Reggae, country music. (Lydie laughing)

[00:37:40] – **Dian:** Reggae, country music to break up with your girlfriends, oh my gosh.

[00:37:43] – **Kunle:** That was it. It was a very hilarious time, actually.

[00:37:47] – **Lydie:** That's a story right there.

[00:37:48] – Dian: But, you know, the funny thing is, I think I know which songs. It's like (singing) "you were the last thing on my mind..."

[00:37:55] – Kunle: Exactly. (Singing) "You were close to me when I did not know..."

[00:38:01] – Dian: "You were close to me, and I did not know." Oh, my gosh.

[00:38:03] – Lydie: The journey, oh no, okay.

[00:38:08] – Kunle: No, it was a funny one. It's – I went back to Nigeria, still working in engineering. Then at some point, I moved back to Ghana because that was the closest. I couldn't speak French. So Ghana is the closest to Nigeria in terms of cultural similarity and uh anglophone. So, yeah, that was how I came to Canada as well. Ghana was actually where I picked up a full-time music career.

[00:38:45] – Dian: So how did you transition into theatre?

[00:38:39] – Kunle: Theatre has been – so storytelling has been part of me growing up, like, I love it. Even my songs, my melodies, how I compose the layers of the songs has always been storytelling. A-B part or B-C part, no, it's always been layered like that. And um, yeah, it was something I've always talked to Kobèna about that someday I admire him so much because I met Kobèna first in theatre. I went to see a show by AC Menser.

[00:39:09] – Dian: Yes. So tell me a little bit about Kobèna, because I don't think we've mentioned him at this point.

[00:39:15] – Kunle: Oh, Kobèna is a genius.

[00:39:17] – Dian: We're talking about Kobèna...

[00:39:20] – Kunle: Aquaa-Harrison. Yeah, Kobèna Aquaa-Harrison. He is a genius. That guy. Supposed to be placed in a show glass, and people just come to watch him, honestly, that's how good he is. And he's also very, very down to earth person. He was supposed to be the music director for the Stratford show, but I've been working with him for a while, and I think he got busy, so he called me, like, hey, there's a show I think you might be perfect for, but I was called in just because I speak the language, and I write in the language fluently. So I was called in to do, to write the music and do the vocals for them, teach them, and get out, that's it. So when I went there, Tawiah was like, "heh, Kobèna spoke highly of you and he's not here. Would you mind stepping up and taking charge of this?" Like, perfect, I went to school for this. I've been preparing for this day for a long, long time. So uh, Kobèna is a multi-instrumentalist and just like a, a great person all around. Yeah, he's kind of a mentor as well. I'll call him my uncle here.

[00:40:35] – Dian: Uncle Kobè. Yeah. So do you think your introduction to theatre is going to translate into a love affair with the theatre?

[00:40:45] – Kunle: It already started. Because I've been looking around, I'm actually planning to see if I can pick up a master's degree in composition and musical theatre.

[00:40:53] – Dian: Oh, wow.

[00:40:55] – Kunle: Yeah.

[00:40:55] – Lydie: So therefore, no affairs. We want, uh, loyalty. (Kunle laughing) No yeah no, no affairs. No affairs. There's no sharing. Like, music is part of theatre as far as I'm concerned. Like, it's part of storytelling. No affairs. Loyalty, yeah, to the craft. (Dian laughing)

[00:41:13] – Kunle: No I think, I think yeah, Stratford. I think also it's the work ethic of – maybe it's also where I started from. Someone said I skipped the line in a way, because people usually start from small theatres, little by little, then graduate. My first –

[00:41:32] – Lydie: I think that's where you were supposed to be.

[00:41:34] – Kunle: Yeah, exactly. So should I go give that person a little bit of a kick? I mean, Stratford was very very um, the organization. I mean, having a structured environment in an artistic environment, it's something that is rare in music, except you are at the level of A-list or something, that's when you have that structure. But on a grassroots level, I mean, we'll go to Bentley's together. Everyone is enjoying, free like as if, and I see them the next day, boom. Straight face work, ready. I'm like, whoa.

[00:42:12] – Dian: Yeah, there's a rigor when you get to that scale of producing, um that you know box office is relying on your ability to perform. So you do need to have a really disciplined practice. Absolutely.

[00:42:25] – Kunle: Yeah. Good. I learned a lot from that, and I brought it back. And somehow I've part ways with a few musicians as a result of that, because I'm like, nah, I can't do this any longer. I got to look for people who are, if you're willing to adjust to that level. But I'm not operating at that level of uncertainty and having to beg you like, "oh, where are you?" Nah, nah, nah.

[00:42:53] – Lydie: One of us, one of us, one of us, (Kunle laughing) musical theatre, musical theatre director, one of us.

[00:43:00] – Dian: Well, I'm very glad to know you at this point –

[00:43:04] – Kunle: Thank you.

[00:43:05] – Dian: I wanted to talk to you a little bit about, because one of the things that we're talking about is the idea of the Black story on stage and the Black body on stage and Black music on stage. So I know, in the past, people have been talking about the idea of representation and seeing you on, seeing ourselves on stage in order to um validate our stories. But I'm hoping that we're getting to the place where we're taking that one step forward. And it's not just about representation and seeing ourselves, but actually bringing our full, authentic selves to those stories and stages, and not, and also looking at the audience members and who we're talking to and what our contract is with that audience, what the social contract is when we walk into a space and what kind of experience that we're offering and what people are expecting from us, as opposed to like fitting into what we're bringing and asking them to participate in. And as a musician who works in traditional forms, but you're also a multi-instrumentalist, you're also uh a multimedia artist, in a way. What are your thoughts on that?

[00:44:20] – Kunle: Well, I think, to be honest, the story started from our part of the world. Everyone has a story. The entire world has a story in itself. But it's very interesting for me to not see much of our

story on stages like in countries like this, because the entire existence of that culture is storytelling, everyday life, even the market. You walk into a market, it's story. And how can, it's just surprising that we cannot bring that or time has not, maybe time and resources and mindset has not allowed us to be in the forefront of theatre, to be honest. I expect to see, and trust me, I am not even looking at just seeing only Black alone. I mean, I expect to see everybody to be ready to work on stories that come from that side of the world, regardless of where you're from, Black, Hispanic, you know because they are so rich. So that's um, I'm hoping things will change, and you guys are leading that uh that course right now. So I'm hoping that there will be more and more of that, more and more Black stories and Black bodies on stage. Comfortably, without having to think about what the next person thinks of me. And I think it starts from within also, too, that recognizing that we may all have the same you know as Blacks, we all have the same similar, um skin texture. However, someone grew up in Jamaica, there's a difference there.

[00:46:14] – Dian: Yes, yes, yes.

[00:46:15] – Kunle: Another person is from Trinidad. There is difference even within Nigeria alone, an Igbo and a Yoruba, there's still difference, with similarities at the same time. I feel the minute we ourselves can accept that differences and work with it and showcase it, it would be easy to transcend. It's a matter of love for each other's differences and figure out how to find the balance and tell the story together. It's all about humanity more than, yeah, because there's a moral in every story.

[00:46:51] – Dian: Yeah. And I feel when you get into the really specifics of who you are and the authentic presentation of self, you get to the more universal, you know?

[00:47:04] – Lydie: To the more universal, but also, I feel like, for our community, we are also craving these stories. We're craving a lot of, we want to discover about ourselves, not always just exposing what we already understand, what we already think that we feel. And it's about expanding and let that imagination make something come alive in your audience and so on. And I feel like what you said, like storytelling is in our bodies in such a way. Like, I have a neighbour two houses down from the yard, I love when they do barbecues. I spy on those parties because stories are so much fun. And they're Haitians like me, so like I can hear it. You can tell that everybody's around, just like, listening and then there's the explosion of the response. And our response is also to our own stories. It just, it comes to life in a very different way. And I would love to explore, just to witness Death and the King's Horsemen. As a Haitian, Black Canadian, I needed and I didn't know that I needed that. And I needed that confrontation within myself, like, how colonized am I? Where am I in this story? It was wonderful to explore more about ourselves and to make discoveries and not just always like making sure that "did you get", asking the "other" to understand me, but for me to understand me and to explore me. So that was a wonderful experience. More exposure.

[00:48:45] – Kunle: Yeah, that (Dian and Kunle overlapping), yeah go on.

[00:48:49] – Dian: I was just going to say, one of the things that I'm feeling is that as a Black theatre company, our conversation has been about community and outwards. It's about making bridges into other communities. But the conversation within ourselves is what I think we have to start figuring out and focusing on and who we are is actually being shaped by the stories we tell ourselves, right?

[00:49:14] – Lydie: Exactly. Absolutely.

[00:49:16] – Kunle: No, I agree 100% with that. And I feel Death and the King's Horseman should be seen, like not just even in Ontario alone. I think that play, that particular production, and the cast on it should be across Canada.

[00:49:39] – Dian: That would be a dream. But that's a very expensive show.

[00:49:42] – Kunle: Well, there are banks, there is TD bank. They will make a killing!

[00:49:47] – Lydie: Right? Okay, so universe, podcasts, send this to the universe.

[00:49:52] – Kunle: Exactly! They will make a lot of money!

[00:49:56] – Lydie: Because that play on tour would reach, touch so many.

[00:50:00] – Dian: I know.

[00:50:01] – Kunle: And it will start conversations for sure.

[00:50:04] – Dian: Absolutely. Um, Kunle, before we let you go, I was wondering what you're working on.

[00:50:12] – Kunle: Ah yup, so quite a lot of things actually. But over the span of now and 2025, that's my, uh, two year plan. If I'm able to actualize it in this year alone, that will be a dream. But I, to be realistic, it's over the next two years. One of it is my album project. I haven't released anything, album, work-wise since 2015, and I've been focused more on building, networking, learning, and creating. And I feel like now it's the time to showcase the evolution and the growth so far. Because I didn't set out to just be a musician, I set out to actually like impact as much as possible and bring back the love for art that you don't have to be a certain type of person to be able to actually work in art. And if you choose to even make it into a business, how you can still stay true to the creation and the dissemination itself, while still being able to afford a basic mortgage over your head, just like every other person, just like a doctor. Because we spend equal amount of years, if not more, to perfect. And art is also as healing as, so I don't see why anyone would see it as a nonessential. That phrase pissed me off a lot during the last two years, and this is "nonessential", I'm like, do you know how much consumption that was going on in terms of art on internet for the last two years?

[00:51:59] – Dian: Right?

[00:51:59] – Kunle: Tons!

[00:52:00] – Dian: Absolutely.

[00:52:01] – Dian: It saved people's minds, it saved people's sanity.

[00:52:04] – Lydie: It was everything. Without art, those 2020, 2021 would have been like the greatest mental meltdown. It would have been a meltdown!

[00:52:15] – Kunle: So yeah, I'm doing that and um also trying to get more into theatre and write music for it. Help people tell the story with the sounds and the music. It's actually something I want to really dedicate into. Um, the other part is also uh Death and the King's Horseman. If the show cannot go on the road yet, I am thinking of taking, uh creating an atmosphere for people of colour to be able to be on the driver's side, not always being on the back side, you know like performing, like, also be the creative. So I'm hoping I'll be able to secure all the support needed to take uh, four songs out of the four to five pieces from the soundtrack, the original music for Death and the King's Horsemen, and blow it into an orchestra performance.

[00:53:14] – Dian: That would be beautiful. I wish you good luck with that. That would be beautiful.

[00:53:20] – Kunle: The way I want to do it is actually have it as inclusive as possible, and find an Indigenous composer, give them one piece of that music, and let them compose it to a 15 minutes or 12 to 15 minutes movement. I just want to see their lens of "where I am coming from". Find a French-Canadian which encompasses, like, maybe someone with a French and Irish background at the same time, like the settlers, someone from that region. What is your lens of this type of music as a composer? Then we all review each other's work. I'll also compose one of those pieces. Then we come together, the three of us, the last one, we all compose it together. So I'm looking for, like, a 60 minutes piece, orchestra piece of four. Yeah, ideas.

[00:54:18] – Dian: Well, my friend, I wish you absolute luck with those grant applications because that's what they sound like.

[00:54:24] – Kunle: Of course you will get tickets!

[00:54:27] – Dian: Yes! And all of the collaboration, and I am 100% sure we will keep in touch over the next few years. Absolutely.

[00:54:35] – Lydie: Absolutely.

[00:54:37] – Dian: Really lovely having you with us today.

[00:54:38] – Kunle: Thank you. Thank you so much.

[00:54:40] – Dian: Yeah.

[00:54:41] – Lydie: Thank you for sharing your love for music, your love for the stage. Be loyal to theatre! (Kunle laughing) We want you!

[00:54:47] – Kunle: I will be. I'll bring more people!

[00:54:51] – Lydie: Yes. So excited for you.

[00:54:54] – Kunle: Thank you. Thank you so much. Good to see you both.

[00:54:57] – Dian: And thank you for being on – you as well! I want to say thank you also for being on our very first episode of La Parole!

[00:55:04] – Kunle: How do you pronounce it, "La Parole", La Parole?

[00:55:10] – Dian: Yeah, the word, like just chat. The talk.

[00:55:14] – Lydie: Talk.

[00:55:15] – Dian: Talk. Okay. And thank you again. Thank you. We'll look forward to seeing you in person sometime soon.

[00:55:24] – Kunle: Yes, I like that word.

[00:55:25] – Lydie: Come visit us. You know where we are. I'll be there this time.

[00:55:30] – Kunle: I'll let you know two weeks in advance. So that –

[00:55:33] – Dian: Good.

[00:55:35] – Lydie: Good. We'll block it.

[00:55:37] – Kunle: All right

[00:55:38] – Lydie: See you soon Kunle.

[00:55:38] – Kunle: Okay, bye bye.

[00:55:39] – Dian: Bye bye.

[00:55:40] – [“Badeku” by Kunle]

[00:56:09] – Dian: (reading an excerpt of *Je Me Souviens* by Lorena Gale) I am on Commercial Drive, sitting in Joe's Café. I'd just bumped into another exile - expatriate and, like those from the old country, hungry for news from home; whenever we meet, we always reminisce or share news of the others we left behind. It's a ritual of love and remembrance played out on alien soil by émigrés all over the world. Only we're in Vancouver and home is Montreal. The same country. At least today it is. We speak in English, my first language and she - and her second. We speak in English because I don't know Greek. We speak candidly, without forethought, without apology. Around us we hear snatches of Italian, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Cantonese, Urdu et cetera. We speak unashamedly and to each other. So I say to my compatriot, “I have just come back from Montreal. I can't believe how it's changed. Everything for sale. Everything for rent. Liquidation. Going out of business. And everywhere those tacky dollar stores. And they're the only ones who seem to be making any money – doing any real business. It's sad. I have never seen Montreal look so bad.” And the next thing I know, there's this long-haired grunged-out French guy in my face saying – “Hey you! You don't say dat! You don't talk about Montréal!” He had been listening to our private conversation, which had obviously offended him, and had half-risen from his seat to stretch across the table and point an accusing finger at me, like he was the long arm of the Language Police and had nabbed himself another Anglo traitor. He looked irate and triumphant like one spoiling for a fight. My friend immediately put her head down like somebody trying to avoid one. Me ...? I was stunned into momentary silence. What could I have possibly said to offend him? That Montreal looked poorly and depressed? The truth? For a second there, I thought I was in a café on St. Denis Street, a little too drunk, voicing my insensitive Anglo opinions a little too loud, and this brave soldier in the struggle for Quebec independence was standing forth to eradicate this heretic from their midst. I looked around expecting to see a room full of hostile and contemptuous people, but no one was paying any attention. I was still in Lotus Land. And what did I care since I wasn't talking to him anyway. So I told him to fuck off and mind his own business! “Non! You fuck off! It is my business. Me. I'm from Montréal.

I know. You. You don't say nutting. Tu n'as pas le droit!" I don't have the right? I don't have the right!? My friend hates confrontation. She tells me to "...ignore him. He's an asshole. He's just looking for a fight. Come on. Let's go somewhere else." But I have gone somewhere else. Thirty-six hundred miles to somewhere else. And I cannot back down. "I don't have the right! Why? Because I'm English? Why? Because I'm Black!?" "Ah, you. You don't know nutting." "Oh! Je sais, moé. Je sais assez que toi, hostie. Et si je n'avais rien su, j'aurais eu le même droit de parler que toi!" "Toi? Tu parles français?!" "Oui. Je parle français. Je viens de Montréal, moé. Je suis Montréalaise. Je suis née a Montréal. Et j'ai le droit à parler. Le même droit à parler que toi, hostie! Avec n'importe qui, n'importe où – okay? So fuck off!" "Eh, eh, eh! C'est correct. Je m'excuse. You come from Montréal. I t'ought ... You know, I from Montréal too, eh. And I t'ought ..." He picked up his backpack and wandered out onto the Drive. My friend examining the residue at the bottom of her cappuccino. She hadn't said much through the entire altercation and I could tell she wanted to go too. Still, I wanted to share my memories of Montreal, but the moment was lost. She had to run. And so we parted. You know, I'd see him on the Drive, from time to time, with a group of other young Québécois beneath the rainbow outside of Joe's Café. His shoulders hunched from the weight of his pack. His long hair matted into incongruous dreads. He had all passion and gesture, speaking French with a fury so familiar that I no longer followed. And when I passed he mumbled "salut" in grudging recognition. We were both, after all, from the same place. His Montréal was my Montreal. His Québec is the Quebec of my birth. Like heads and tails, we are two faces on the same coin. One side inscribed in English, one in French. And we are both so far from home. I am an expatriate Anglophone Montréalaise Québécoise exiled in Canada. And I remember. Je me souviens ...

[01:02:23] – [Theme music: "Cocktail Music" by Francesco Biondi]

[01:02:33] – **Dian:** I guess that's the end of this episode and, um, we will look forward to delivering a few more before the end of the year.

[01:02:41] – **Lydie:** Yes.

[01:02:42] – **Dian:** And we hope to have some other exciting guests with us as well.

[01:02:45] – **Lydie:** It's a lot of fun. We get to discover people that know our city, that love our city. We get to explore theatre. I'm so excited. That was fun!

[01:02:55] – [Theme music: "Cocktail Music" by Francesco Biondi]