



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker, and Trish Cooke.

**Patricia Cumper** The Amplify Project. Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper.

**Pauline Walker** And I'm Pauline Walker. We created the Amplify Project so we could talk to writers for the stage, page, and screen about their lives, work, and artistic practice.

**PC** We've really enjoyed these conversations. We hope you enjoy listening to them.

**PW** The short description of this writer is that she's a playwright and a children's book writer, an actress and television presenter to that. She's written for East Enders and storylined for Emmerdale, has been writer in residence at BBC North, Liverpool Playhouse and The Bush Theatre. Her pantomimes at Theatre Royal Stratford East were legendary. Her Cinderella was the first panto to be nominated for an Olivier award. She also writes book for children. *So Much* won the Smarties Book Prize, Kurt Maschler Award and was voted one of the 100 Best Children's Book by Time Out in 2016. She's a fellow of The Royal Literary Fund. And those are just the highlights of her stellar career. Trish Cooke, welcome to The Amplify Project.

**Trish Cooke** Thank you. Hello. It's good to be here.

**PC** So, I'm going to kick off with the first question. Could you tell us something about your childhood? When did words and stories become part of your life?

**TC** I think words and stories have always been part of my life so it's hard to pinpoint an exact time. From a very early age, from maybe four or five, I remember just enjoying performing and acting out stories. Then I remember my sisters and I who are just a few older than me, we'd read comics like *The Beezer* and *Dandy* and then act out characters and their stories on the street with friends and do performances. So, we were always making stories together. And I like listening to my dad tell stories of back home in Dominica where my parents were born and my eldest siblings were born. So I was always a good listener of stories and I enjoyed that sharing and watching responses once I delivered my own stories as well. And I kept a diary from – during my teenage years, probably from the age, maybe, like 12 years to right up into my adult years. And I like writing poems and writing stories and so it was always an outlet for me. I come from a big family and so it was my way of having time to myself where I could just use my imagination and escape and have my own space.

**PW** So, when did you make the decision to become a writer? And what sort of writer did you want to be?

**TC** I don't think I ever made the decision. I think that was made for me because I was always doing it anyway. But officially, to become a professional writer, I think that happened, I sent my work off to a competition. It was the ACER Black Women – no, Black Writers Award in 1985 or 1986. And I was one of the winners, actually the overall winner with a short story that I'd written called 'We Expect Respect'. And that really started me off because it made me see that people are actually interested in what I was writing. I was a bit shocked but it encouraged me to carry on. And that short story was later taken up with Pam Fraser Solomon did the short story on radio. And it was the beginning for me of believing that I could write and it just opened up lots of possibilities. And then from then, I was able to feel brave enough to send other work off to different places and theatres and to publishers just to see what other people thought. And they weren't always good responses. I've had lots of feedback that was not always good but it helped me to then look at what I'd written and go on and improve them.

**PC** Yeah, it's always interesting to know when people claimed the title of writer. But you have written in just a number of different genres. So, the one I'd quite like to talk about first if you don't mind is writing for pantomime because that's such a particular form, so British. And you got sort of tried and tested stories and stock characters so you made your panto scripts completely your own. How did you go about doing that?

**TC** Well, just before I started writing for panto, I wasn't a big fan of pantomimes to be honest. My first, the first time I saw a pantomime was in my teenage years. It was at The Alhambra Theatre in Bradford where I was brought up and lived. Now, and it was Charlie Drake. I don't know if you remember Charlie Drake. He was Buttons and then it was Annie Aston from the Golden Shot was *Cinderella* and it was very, very white and very traditional and very sparkly and I loved all the sparkle and I love the ambience in the audience and all of that magic and all of that. But there was nothing really in there that was me. There was nothing that I could say that I could relate to apart from magic and the imagination and all of that. But I wasn't in there. I wasn't part of that story. And so, when Kerry Michael asked me to write the panto, the first panto which was, what was it? *Pinocchio* in 2005, I really felt that responsibility to create something that I enjoyed, something that meant something to me and something that I could relate to and then hopefully, a mixed audience could relate to because the Theatre Royal audience in Stratford is a very mixed audience and so even though I wasn't from London, I understood that it was important to make stories relevant and still use those traditional elements within the panto but have things in there that meant something that was true to me. And I think with *Cinderella* later on, 2007, that was the one that was nominated for the Olivier Award. I set that in a place called Guada Lumpa which I think I've just come back from Dominica and Guadalupe is very close to Dominica and so I was using things that I knew that were my truth and I could relate to. And the cast was a mixed cast. So, it wasn't like a Black panto. It was a pantomime that included a wide audience you know, young and old and lots of different races and I like to do that within what I write, whether it's a pantomime, whether it's a short story, a straight play, anything that I write, I like to put some of me in there. Well, I have no choice. It comes from a place. And so, therefore, if I'm writing it, I have to have a reason for writing it. There's never anything too trivial because I find my truth within it and the heart within it that makes it important for me to write. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to write it.

**PC** Yes. I think that is a trend that runs through everything of yours that I've read. But just be a little practical right now, when you've written the script, how far in advance do you write it? And are you actually sitting there during rehearsal, the rewrites, how...?

**TC** Yes.

**PC** I'm curious about the practical process.

**TC** Okay. Well, it's a continuous process so for example, Kerry would approach me and say, "Okay, which panto would you like to do?" And then when we discuss whether Stratford East had, when they last did that particular pantomime. Then we'd come to a decision about what pantomime it was going to be. Then I was left to write a draft. And that draft, that early draft was very rough draft of just what came out of me. I've done my research, find out the origins of that story and then try to be as true to that as possible. Then add my layers of why it's important for me to write it so the early draft had a lot of – it wasn't very theatrical in a sense but very, had a lot of explaining in there of why I was writing it and where the songs might come in and what those songs would do and why they were important. So, they were quite heavy and detailed and very much far away from pantomime and more to do with the story I wanted to tell within it. And you wouldn't think that from the end result but there was a lot of thinking behind them and a lot of contexts for me to work through so then I'd give that to Kerry and then Kerry would look at it and then we'd kind of scrap that but at least we knew where it started from (Laughter). We knew where it started from. And because again, when I first started writing pantomimes, I wasn't very familiar with the rules of a pantomime so that we have to have someone saying "he's behind you". We have to have the sweets thrown out and we have to have all those things that are in there and the dame of course in there that make it a pantomime, have those things in. Now, there were people there that could tell me those things. Robert Hyman, who I've worked with on pantomime to do the music, he had done pantomimes there for a while and knew the structure of pantomimes and so he could throw in things. I wasn't tied to those things which was great. I could write what I wanted then we could thread those things in afterwards. I'm not a fan of slapstick but it's necessary to put slapstick within there. And once you're in the rehearsal room, it's fun because you're all collaborating. You're all putting things in. And for instance, I might go into the rehearsal room with the eighth draft which has gone through lots and lots of work and then it's the 11<sup>th</sup> draft that we actually use because during rehearsal, I'm always, I'm there in the rehearsal room every day and I'm writing. And I'm looking and seeing what that actor can offer and letting them play to their strengths and writing for them. I like writing for people.

**PC** And you've had something. I know people in there as well. I mean I've always enjoyed them just as much your wonderful stories but also that you've given space was truly interesting. I mean people like Barrington who was just wonderful you know...

**TC** He was.

**PC** ...critically as an actor.

**TC** And in *Pinocchio*, he was Geppetto's character, the toymaker and he was fabulous. And he is a good example of someone that you can write for and you know they're going to deliver, and even like creating songs for him as well. Between Robert and I, we were able to create songs that suited

him and we do that with a lot of the actors that work there on the pantomimes as well. And that's what makes them so rich as well. Nobody is precious about what they've done. You put in what you're putting and you know that everybody else puts in on the same level from their perspective and it becomes something that is joyous to work on and to work through. And so, by the end of it, it's nowhere like that first draft. But the heart of it, the heart is still the same. The thing that I want to get across is still the same. And I stay true to that whatever that is. And so, I make sure that when I'm in the rehearsal room that none of that is lost because sometimes you could be at the mercy of actors just wanting to, well, I would do it this way and I would do it that way and then you could lose the whole story and so my role within the rehearsal room is to make sure that's not lost and keep that, the thread there and make sure that the story is being told and it still makes sense because everybody likes to claim their piece and it get muddled unless you've got a strong eye on that.

**PC** So, you're almost in the middle holding all the bits together to make sure that the heart still beats.

**TC** Yes. And sometimes that can be difficult so you need a good team of people around you that you trust and they trust you. And you can then deliver something that is just truly magical because there's no way I could see what the end result would look like because everybody has put their heart into it as well. And then when you get the audience in, that's another key element to the pantomime because you may go in there with draft 11 and everybody there performing their hearts out. But once you have the audience in, there's a completely different rhythm that adds to it again which is just with all theatre but I guess with interactive theatre such as a pantomime, it's even more so.

**PC** What we're going to do now is have a little listen to an excerpt from one of your pantomimes.

[Extract from *Cinderella*]

**PC** I confess, I only just came across your book of Caribbean folktales so I wondered what does the Caribbean mean to you?

**TC** What does the Caribbean mean to me? The Caribbean is my heart really. It's part of me. It's always been part of me so it's hard to imagine it not being part of me even though I was born in Bradford, Yorkshire, England. My parents and my elder siblings were born in Dominica. And so, the household was always full of the Caribbean, full of Dominica. My mum spoke the French Creole all the time. There was a bit of English in there now and then. But if you are Jamaican or English or whoever came into the house, they got some of the patois. They got the French Creole and they worked it out because it was part-English and part- French Creole. So, she never compromised on who she was and that for me is a legacy that I cherish. And so, when I went to Dominica for the first time, I was 21 years old. And I went with my dad who hadn't been back for 30 years. And so, for me, seeing the place with fresh eyes, never having set foot there before but have the world in my head, in my imagination of what this place would be like, I was already writing about the place before I even visited and so I was able to fine-tune what I'd written after going there. And so, my dad saw the place with eyes of now a grown man and he left as a young man and he'd grown up there and so the place to him looked a lot smaller. And he was seeing people that he hadn't seen for

years so we both had different perspectives but I just remember getting off the plane and the heat and the smell and the warmth. And then walking around and seeing Black faces everywhere and hearing the sound of their voices and hearing the language. I'm just feeling at home, totally at home. And I thought, this is it. I've arrived. This is where I'm from. This is me. I'm Dominican until people really made me know I wasn't Dominican. They claimed me and they took me in but they called me English and it became very odd. Because at that time, I was juggling with my own identity and being English and I was very much in that headspace of when I go to Dominica, that will be it. I will know where I'm from and my roots and my grounding and I'll understand me a lot better. And it didn't work like that because I suddenly realized, I was still an outsider. And it was trying to put that and sit with that and understand that and make myself realize that you know what, it's okay to have two places. It's actually very rich to be able to claim home in two places and know that I belong in either and they belong in me. And so, it took me a while to understand that. It's still something that I knew that I worked through in a lot of my writing early on. There's a play *Running Dream* that was on in 1993 in Stratford at Theatre Royal in Stratford. And that was about three sisters, one born in the Caribbean who stayed, one born, who travelled to England as a child and the third daughter or sister was a character similar to myself who was born in England. And I played around with the dynamics of what that meant because I knew that those relationships within my own family. And I was also working through things about my Caribbeaness within that as well. And it helped me to then know who I was and be accepting of all the parts of me. And yeah, the Caribbean, it means a lot to me and not just Dominica. I love St. Lucia. I love Jamaica. I love all the islands that I've been to, Barbados, and I know there are a lot more places that I want to visit. And each of them has their own individual way of doing things and they have different ways of talking. But I feel at ease and at home there, in them.

**PC** But you, I mean I really, I wanted to compliment you on being a Caribbean person because so many people have an island loyalty rather than a regional loyalty.

**TC** Ah. (Laughter)

**PC** But that really moved me but I mean it's one thing to do that there. It's another one to come to England and get them published. How did you go about getting them published, getting the collection published?

**TC** The collection was published because I was approached by Puffin Penguin. And previous to that, I'd written a book for, was it Franklin Watts? I think it is. And this book was called *Hey Crazy Riddle* and I'd rewritten stories that had come from the Caribbean and also, but written them in my own style. For instance, there's a poem I wrote which was 'Hey Crazy Riddle' which was based on 'Hey Diddle Diddle'. And I've kind of mixed and matched with it and I used my own take on that nursery rhyme. And then I think I had the story in there 'Why the Dog Barks' and not like all the why do, why, stories. And so, I had this thought to write more or look at retellings of more of them. And so, when Penguin approached me to do this, I think they were doing two others and they were *Tales from India* and *Tales from Africa* and so *Tales from the Caribbean* was my one to do. But then researching those was quite difficult because a lot of our stories are being passed on orally. And those that are written down are written in a specific way so they are to be read out loud. And I wanted to make this one something that could also be read in your head so that you don't need to read it out loud if you don't want to but you can if you want to. And that was quite difficult to write

a story or stories that had 2,500 words each that still maintained the flavour of the Caribbean but sort of told them in a traditional English way as well so it was combining both of what I knew about the Caribbean and England and telling them in my voice. And so, when I found like a trace of a story or a small bud of a story that was told very quickly because a lot of the stories that we have like proverbs or just sayings and they've got these morals in there that are not always fully-fledged stories but we get them. And so, I needed to break them down and make them a bit longer and so the ones that I chose, some of them were ones that I heard myself and some that I found written down. And I just put my take on them and just try to make them as standalone as possible and I suppose a combination of my traditional English and Caribbean values as well.

**PW** So, writing books for children, that's a particular skill, isn't it? So, can you tell us something about what you've learned about writing in this form?

**TC** It is a particular skill but it is very, it's still – I mean storytelling for me, I don't think there's any major difference in storytelling. It's communication. It's telling, it's like somebody telling a joke although I'm not really good at telling jokes. I always forget the punchline. But it's looking at the person that you're talking to and getting, and communicating and talking and saying what it is that you want to say. So, with children books, that's just the same and it's good to have children around you so that you get that language and understand their way. So, I believe you can tell a child any story. And it can be an adult story but you have to have the language and you have to have an understanding of what they understand not talk down to them but speak in a way that they understand just like you understand. And I'm lucky enough to have that kind of childlike I suppose simple understanding. I like things broken down into simple language. I like to understand. I like to kind of throw out all the extra words that don't need to be there because I want to understand what you're trying to tell me and I want to understand it clearly. And so, because I naturally do that, I suppose writing for children or adults clearly is what I tend to work on. And so, I guess in answer to your question, that's the key thing but then when you're looking at target audiences and specific audiences and specific age groups, there are certain things that you need to look out for like with the preschool picture books. There's things like repetition and accumulation of things like in *So Much* I like to repeat certain phrases so that the children can join in pretty much like what I do with panto so it's leaving spaces for interaction so that that age group can feel part of the story and feel included within the story. So, I guess with each type of writing, you find what it is that that audience needs and you train yourself to be able to deliver that but it's all about communication. If they don't get it then you've failed.

**PW** You've worked with some of the best children's illustrators, what it's like working with them to bring your stories alive?

**TC** That's a different process to panto because everybody is in the room. I mean once we get into rehearsals, it's a free for all and everybody can throw their ideas in and then I can go away and look at that and mould it into something that is based on where I started from, with a picture book I write the story but when I'm writing it, I have in my mind, what pictures could be in there. I also, I studied how to, how picture books are formed and so I look and see where those page turns should be and what that anticipation is and that expectation is for a child. The illustrations shouldn't say exactly what the words are saying. They should add another element, another dimension, another part of the story. And so, working with an illustrator such as Helen Oxenbury for instance, that for

me was like, ah, because my eldest son, I was in the process – he was one and I was already reading him a lot of the Helen Oxenbury books and so when she said yes to illustrate *So Much* I was totally gobsmacked. I just thought, yes, we have to wait a whole year before she was free to do it but it was worth it. And then she took a year to do her illustrations and the process of working with her was once you read the text, the text has to be able to stand alone. She shouldn't need to ask me anything. Just like we allow the actors to explore within a script, my job is done when I've written the script and then I enhanced with them what we can get to make it better. So, with the illustrator, I don't tread on their toes and say, you should draw this and you should draw that and this, I'm hopeful that what I've suggested within the text is what they come up with and more. And with Helen, because of her expertise, she got exactly what it was I wanted. She put the work in. She researched. She went to places and she found the people that needed to be in the book. So, she said she went to Brixton. She did some sketches. And she got the feel of the characters. Now, the magical thing about her work is that, or with this particular book is, it's years later, I was asked to do something with the BBC on children's books and so they asked me to look for some photographs of my family and to put on the program as well. And I found exact replicas and she's never seen my family. She's never seen photographs or anything of things that were in the book so it's like she intuitively some kind of spiritual connection or something, I've managed to capture certain elements and poses and there's a picture of the baby with Cousin Kay-Kay on the floor and he's lying on his back and he's got the baby up in the air, I hadn't written that but yet she was able to create that picture. I found the exact photograph with my nephew and my son and some two people sitting the chair on their feet showing in the background. It's like she just jumped into my photograph album and found these images. And there's a picture of nanny and gran-gran, my mum was quite chubby, her friend was very thin and tall. And she found these images and I don't know how through the work that I've written but they tied in so closely with own family that I can only say that this is just divine intervention or something or, it's just amazing.

And it happened again with another illustrator, Sharon Wilson. I wrote a book called *The Grandad Tree* picture book with Walker again and this was based on my dad after he died, my son he was about four then, three or four and he kept asking where has grandad gone, where is grandad. And there was a bumblebee in the garden and he was, he used two lolly sticks to bury the bumblebee and new things were going on in his head and I just need to write something that would best just kind of help him connect with that cycle of life and death and I wanted to write a joyful book, not something that was going to be depressing about somebody dying and so I wrote a story about the cycle of life but also the cycle of an apple tree and how the seasons, from a seed to the apple to a tree and the blossoming. And so, I also kind of put that alongside my dad's life from a boy climbing coconut trees to a man having a wife and grandchildren. And within that book really sparing with the words but it's a poem really and she was able to capture that with pastel colours. She lives all the way in Bermuda so I didn't know her but the funny thing is the character, whoever she used to be the grandad in the book looked exactly like my dad. And she'd never seen pictures of him or anything and that was another moment where I just thought you know, sometimes artists, creative people can just, I don't know just hone in on things and can tune in to other creatives. And when it works, it works really, really well. And we didn't even, didn't have to, and I was never in the same room as these artists. They sent their work and obviously, through edits, I was able to look, when the publisher sent me what they've done so far, I was able to say, well, I don't agree with that or I agree with this. Then it's sent back to them and they make those changes but overall, I think once

you get the right people involved, like I said earlier, once you get the right people involved, the work is done.

**PC** Yes. And it's a kind of intuitive partnership, isn't it, getting work. I'm going to go and ask you the next question now because you also write plays for the stage. You've written for television. You've written for radio. So, why do you find it necessary to write stories in so many different forms?

**TC** I think it's because within the writing industry as you know, Pat, there's the always regular work and you'll find yourself coming against brick walls and you can go so far especially within television writing, you can go so far. And it could really crush you when your work is rejected or it is taken so far and you think this is it. You're going to go, get through and you got to do this and then it's another initiative or it's another this and you don't get that far. And you could stop, well, I could, I could have stopped writing and just gone, you know what, I'll do another job. But my, I don't know, my make up seems to be you to turn to a different form of writing so I might be writing for the radio. And then after that, I find that, okay, I've gone as far as I can go for now, here so let me start writing this thing in a different way so it might be a story and then a narrative and written in a different way. And so, I found that it's helped me to keep going. It's helped me to just recharge and I mean we were talking earlier, not on this recording but about you and how you work and how you sometimes have to stop and just go and cook and do something else just to take your mind, just to give yourself a rest from one type of work to another kind of work. And I guess, my rest or change, a change is as good as a rest and so I change to a different form. And I get excited about that again. And then by the time, I go back to the form that just made me bit miserable, I feel happy about it again so then it's, yeah, so I just kind of find that works for me, not for everybody but that works for me. It just makes me feel like each time I go into a new form or writing, it's fresh again. And I can just enjoy it like it's the first time.

**PW** So, is that what sustained you, do you think through your so far long, successful career?

**TC** Yes, it definitely is. It's been my way of, yeah, to keep going because like I said it has been tough sometimes and you think why am I doing this to myself. There's very little money in it sometimes. Sometimes, you get lots of it. And then you've got to make that last for a while. And other times, it's very dry and you don't know why you're doing, but you're still writing and you're still writing and somebody might buy it and somebody might like it because that's what I do and that's what I enjoy doing but to make a career out of it, I think if I had thought about it early on and the way that I'm thinking about it now, maybe I wouldn't have gone into it but I'm glad, I did and I'm glad I stuck it out and I'm glad I'm still here. And you know it's good to just keep reinventing yourself in a sense and doing different things because it just, it makes the marathon a bit shorter, yeah.

**PC** Yes. That's exactly where I'm putting it. Absolutely. But here's a question that we ask all the writers that we talk to. What does it mean to you to be called a Black writer?

**TC** It is what I am. I'm a Black writer. What I don't like is when they limit what you are supposed to write because you're a Black writer but not just a Black writer but a Black woman writer and expect certain things, when I say they, I'm thinking about the gatekeepers and people who are the ones who commission and the ones who say whether your work can be put on or not. And so, it becomes sometimes like you're expected to write a particular thing and that is your category and therefore,



that's what you should write. And then if you write outside of that box, it's not considered. That I don't like. But I'm proud to be a Black woman writer. And I write what is true to me. I write what comes from my heart. And it's important, I think to make sure that we as writers, as Black writers, as Black women writers, we highlight these characters that are important to us. Otherwise, those stories will go untold.

**PC** Absolutely.

**PW** Do you think it's made a difference to your career not being based in London? And if so, what kind of difference has it made?

**TC** Well, when I was – I lived, I'm from Bradford as you know. And then I moved to London in 1980, when was it 1984 and I lived there for 13 years. And during that time, I was performing and squeezing in the writing. And I was doing a lot of theatre in education. I started off as a stage manager with Black Theatre Co-op but I wanted to act and I wanted to write. I knew I wanted to do those things. But the acting took over a little bit. I did some presenting for CBeebies and that took up a lot of my time. And so, the writing was on the periphery of everything that I was doing and I was getting frustrated. And so, I moved back to Bradford in '96. And at that time, I had a seven-year-old. My son was seven years old and I wanted to be near family. And I thought now is the time to flip it and focus on the writing and squeeze the acting in between. And so, I didn't really need to be in London because then as a writer, you can write anywhere. You go for meetings, wherever they are. You have a bit more control on your life. Whereas with the acting, I felt like when the auditions happened, I had to be ready and off I was going and you might get the job or you might not. It was always on tenterhooks. I felt as if I had more control as a writer and therefore, I had more control of where I wanted to be. And then being up north in Yorkshire just felt like that's where I want to be. I want to be within reach of family. I want to be able to see grass and trees which is where I'm at now. I just needed that to be out of the London concrete. And it works for me. And it hasn't really hindered my writing in any way.

**PC** Good. Glad to hear that. I would love to have some grass and green trees (Laughter) if you know what I mean. Right. With Black Lives Matter, COVID-19, The Me Too Movement, we're sort of living in a time of huge change, what have you observed of that change and do you think it has a significance for writers, for Black writers in the future?

**TC** I think it's been a big change because with the COVID and with the Black Lives Matter, for me, it's meant that I've spent more time at home, less time going on the train for meetings and having Zoom meetings and doing more workshops as well online so that's affected me in that I've realized, I don't really need to be out there as much. I enjoy that and I enjoy the social side of stuff but as I'm getting older, the movement and the going backwards and forwards, carrying books here and there can be quite draining. And so, I've enjoyed being still very much. The Black Lives Matter has actually unfortunately, it had to take a man to die for this to happen but unfortunately, but it has increased the interest in my children's books mostly. And I've noticed that theatre companies as well have started to step up a bit and see that they need to include us in their work. But I think the next step is for us to be the gatekeepers, for us to be the ones making the decisions because otherwise, that won't be sustained. It will be us still waiting for, in a sense, handouts or for others to understand where we're at. And I think we need to take that responsibility a bit further. I think that's where the

older ones of us need to really, not step up, but get the opportunities to be able to lead and bring the younger ones in and make it a little bit easier so that they don't have to over explain what it is that they've written or what they want to do. But if there are people like us on the other side of the fence or the gate then we can understand it so that they can work on the other bits that need the work, the not the explaining and the defending and the, which I found over the years has been the bits that have worn me down. And so, it would be, I think, good if because of everything that's happened that the future holds a better structure, a better setup so that many of us are there waiting for the younger people to come with their ideas and we can then put them in place and we have the power to be able to produce and make the churned out.

**PW** It's kind of like opportunity without judgement, isn't it really?

**TC** Yeah, it is. And it's, you know I remember when *Running Dream* was on in Stratford and Philip Hedley, a great thing that I remember him saying was, "I don't understand this play, Trish, *Running Dream*. I don't understand it. But, I can show it to other people that might get it." He can see there's a bud of something there and he was man enough to step back and say, "Mm. I don't think I understand it. I'm not the person to be able to deal with this. Let me find others who can." And I think that's what there needs to be more of.

**PC** Yes, absolutely. I have this vision of the establishment essentially being like a bowl of Jell-O. You slap it and it jiggles a bit but it keeps its form. And I think at this point, we just need to be emptying the bowl, restarting, building new structures. And it's all that old Garveyite thing own the means of production as far as possible, have the power structures to make the decisions - definitely.

**TC** Yes. But those changes are happening you know. Young people kind of really stepping up you know Michaela Coel and the others that are just saying what they mean and having the confidence to be able to follow it through. I don't think that was as much an option when we were younger. And so, it was just getting your foot through the door was hard enough. (Laughter) But to actually get them to listen and flip it, that's somehow, I think that's the next generation's responsibility. And we have to be the ones that capture that and allow them to do that.

**PC** Yes, completely agree.

**PW** Is there anything you haven't done yet that you'd like to do?

**TC** Produce, I think just exactly what we were just talking about there, be a gatekeeper, be the one, or one of the team of people that make decisions about what's on and how to manage that. I think it's time now if not before, I think it should have been done earlier but I never had the confidence to or the knowhow to be able to be put in those positions and trusted with that and I want to, yeah, that's the main thing, I think. It's just yeah, having that power now to be able to stir things and do something with it.

**PW** Now, we come to our final question and this has gone so quickly (chuckles) because we love to end on a note of celebration. What are the best things about being Trish Cooke?

**TC** Best things about being Trish Cooke? Right now, I'm just happy to be alive. I mean at the moment, there are so many friends and people that are just passing away that I'm like, it's just good to be here you know and still having input and still be part of this thing called life and being loved by

family and friends and still having choices, I guess. Not everyone is able to have the choices that I've got at the moment and especially with COVID, I've been lucky enough to be able to have work. A lot of friends within the creative industry have struggled especially theatre. And I'm happy to be able to see my grandchildren, see them grow, see my children doing well. Yeah, I think I'm at the point in my life now where I'm just happy to be able to be at a point where I can ask myself what do I want to do next and to be able to just consider it and take my time with it and not feel as if I have to do everything, even through COVID, I think I said yes to everything. I think I'm at a point where I can go, you know what? What do I need to do? Be kind to myself and enjoy the rest of whatever life has to offer.

**PC** And I think celebrate all the things you've achieved so far.

**TC** Yes. It's making time for that which I don't think I have. This conversation with you two now is actually helping me to go, "You know what? I've done all right. Let me just take..."

**PC** A little more than all right.

**TC** Let me take – but you know yourself. You don't always take that time to do that because you're too busy looking for the next piece of work as a self-employed person. You're looking for the next piece of work and you haven't finished the one you're doing yet but you're thinking, okay, what's around the corner. And you never have that time to be able to just sit back and go, "Wow, that's a piece of work I enjoyed." You know when just before this talk now, I thought, okay, one of the questions I was going through and I thought, oh, yeah, I've forgotten about my first story, *We Expect Respect* and how I'd sent it off in 1985, 1986 to – so then I took it off the shelf and I just read it through and I thought, "Actually, that is a fine piece of writing. And I really enjoyed reading it." It's times when you have to look at yourself and go, "I'm doing well. I've done some good work." Americans do it all the time. They celebrate themselves all the time but I think it's a British thing in that you kind of just keep your head down and you just, you appear humble all the time. But right now, I'm in a place where I'd like to celebrate what I've done and it's a good place to be.

**P** I think also you should add to that that you've made a difference. I think that's important.

**TC** That is important as well and it's only in hindsight that you can see what difference you've made. And when you start getting feedback from people, especially with the book *So Much*, it's been out since 1994. And that's what over 30, is it, it's coming up to 30. So, anyway, my math isn't good as you can see. (Laughter) But it was written for my first son and he's now 32 so when I wrote it, he was a baby. When it came out it was in '94. So, and it's been reprinted and reprinted. It's winning awards and it's getting a lot of recognition. And that's something I wrote a long time ago. And it's, looking back on those things, at the time, you just do them. You fleet through and you kind of just get on with things. But when you get that recognition and acknowledgement, you're able to then go, yeah. But it's funny how you have to wait for other people to acknowledge it before you can see it in yourself sometimes.

**PC** Sometimes.

**TC** Sometimes. Yeah. I mean I knew it but I didn't have the confidence that I have now to be able to go that is good work, yeah.

**PW** Well, thank you for talking to us. And we celebrate you.

**TC** Thank you. (Laughter)

**PC** Yes. Thank you very much, Trish. This has been great fun.

**TC** Thank you. Thanks for asking me and thanks for letting me go down memory lane and yeah, I don't always get the opportunity to do that. I'm always asking other people especially with the work with Writer's Mosaic which I've been doing but it's nice to be able to just have someone ask me so thank you.

**PC** Yeah. We turned the tables on you this time.

**TC** Yeah. Thank you.

**PC** Good. Lovely.

**PW** Do check with our website [theamplifyproject.co.uk](http://theamplifyproject.co.uk) for other podcasts in this series and for further information about Black British writing.

**PC** The Amplify Project is funded by Arts Council England.

#### **Terms of Use**

This content is owned by The Amplify Project or our licensors and all rights are reserved. If you would like to use any material from this transcript please contact either

[PatriciaCumper@theamplifyproject.co.uk](mailto:PatriciaCumper@theamplifyproject.co.uk) or [PaulineWalker@theamplifyproject.co.uk](mailto:PaulineWalker@theamplifyproject.co.uk)

See Terms of Use: <https://theamplifyproject.co.uk/terms-of-use/>