



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Roy Williams.

The Amplify Project. Black writers in their own words. I'm Pat Cumper. 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. We've really enjoyed these conversations. We hope you enjoy listening to them.

Our guest is Roy Samuel Williams, fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and officer of the Order of the British Empire. He's the UK's leading Black playwright with a large and award-winning body of work. His plays include the No Boys Cricket Club, Starstruck, Clubland, Sing Your Heart Out for The Lads, Sucker Punch, Kingston 14, Death of England, Unexpected Twist, among many others. He has won awards from BAFTA, the Writers Guild, the Alfred Fagan and George Devine Awards, and the Evening Standard Theatre Awards, to name just a few. He has chronicled and continues to chronicle British life and the Black British experience to experiment with form, to nurture and to mentor fellow playwrights to work across stage, audio and screen.

Pauline Walker Roy Williams, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Roy Williams Oh, it's a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

Patricia Cumper Well, I get to ask the first question?

RW Fire away, Pat.

PC When did words and particularly stories become important to you?

RW From a very young age, I wouldn't be able to tell you specifically when it was, but it was from a very young age. I think it had a lot to do with my background growing up in West London. I was the youngest child of four in a single parent family. My parents divorced when I was two. My dad went to live in America and that was pretty much the last we ever saw of him. So, my mum had to kind of raise us by herself and, yeah, it was hard, but we got on with it. But the thing is, there was a big age gap between myself and my siblings. My oldest brother, Mark, I think it was a 16-year age gap. So, growing up, we never had what you might say is a traditional sibling relationship. He felt almost like more like a distant relative who I would see for Christmas and Christenings and other family functions. So, I spent a lot of time on my own, I would say particularly, not during school time, but during, like, break time. And I think I was just that kid. I just liked being on my own. I didn't socialise much. I don't know why, it just wasn't me. Mostly because I just felt even back then, I knew I was kind of different from the other kids, particularly also the Black kids. I would watch them and they were quite agile, athletic, good at sports, all the spread, you name the stereotype, that's what they were. And I just knew that wasn't me, even though I tried. You know, I had a sort of pathetic fantasy about being a footballer playing for Queens Park Rangers, but that just wasn't happening. So, I just spent a lot of time on my own and to keep me quiet they just plonked me in front of the television. And I just watched everything, I just absorbed everything, commercials, dramas and I

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would remember characters names, characters plotlines, developments. My mum was a massive, massive Crossroads fan. She loved Crossroads. So, I'd watch it with her because that was mum's time. When she came in from work, it was a sit down and watch an episode of Crossroads and then read a book. And a lot of books she would read were the classics, but the most ones she really enjoyed were the Dickens and actually, that chimed with kind of where we were living because I grew up in a council estate in West London called Henry Dickens Courts. And it didn't mean anything to me at the time when I was a kid. But then as I started to learn how to read and such, I wondered, what was Dombey? Because we lived in Dombey House and across the way where my friend lived was Nickel Bury House and Copperfield. It was really strange, weird names. And then when mum read one Dickens book and gave it to me, it was David Copperfield. That's when I started putting it together and I realised, oh, maybe they're named after Charles Dickens. And it turns out Henry Dickens was Charles Dickens's son. So, growing up, that kind of literature world almost was just around me. And it just got me inquisitive and asking questions, particularly when mum would be reading the books. And I would pester her sometimes, just saying, what's happening? And she would like, you know again, I had to be reminded by my siblings, don't disturb mum, let her read her book. And then when she finished, she would, throw it to me and give it to me. And then I would read them. And that's kind of how my love of literature began with that. Just reading the second-hand books. She bought them and then she would give them or she'd get them from a library, you know, in the good old days when people actually went to libraries. And my mum did a lot of that. And then she would give it to me, and then I would read it. And sometimes I had to read it really quickly to give it back at a certain time because we had a mobile library. This doesn't happen anymore. We had a mobile library coming into the estate every Thursday.

PC Wow.

RW And that was like when I got older, I remember I lived for Thursday afternoons going in there and reading books, and sometimes they had to chuck me out and I just read everything. I read novels, like Dickens. I also read Tintin books and the Asterix books as well. I just read, read, read, and read.

PC It's funny, the parallels. So, many writers we speak to have these worlds in which they live.

RW Yeah.

PC You know, And I have to say, yeah, Asterix was good.

RW He was all right. He was okay. Tintin is funny because I look back on, I think maybe Tintin's weren't the right book. So, the way that, people of colour were portrayed in those books was very questionable. And I also remember at school. So, as well as living for Thursdays when the mobile library would show up, I also lived for Fridays because we had our last lesson at school before everyone went home for the weekend. And we'd all sit on the carpet, gather around, and our teacher and I remember her name, Miss Graham, sat in a big chair, and she read passages from books, and we would just, sit there, absorb, and just listen. And again, the books she read if I knew then what I know now, the books she read were, Enid Blyton books. Again, that's another author whose portrayal of people of colour was questionable, but for me, it was just storytelling, and it was so vivid, and I think it had a lot to do with how Miss Graham, read out and she played all the characters and just read out to us, and I loved it. So, I just thought, oh, this is great. This is fun. And, that was my favourite time.

PW So, you were really in your imagination a lot as a kid?

RW I was, yeah. Sometimes too much. I think I was a problem child. I think there are moments in my youth where I think my family were worried about me. They thought, what is wrong with him? Why can't he just snap out of it? And I did daydream a lot in school as well. English, you couldn't keep me away from book. I was alert, always just paying attention. Other lessons, such as Maths, the important ones, I couldn't focus. I couldn't, just couldn't do the work. I just daydreamed but English I excelled at. When I was at secondary school, I remember every English test was given to me. I always finished in the top two, without a doubt. Other lessons, not so much.

PW So, how did you use your imagination then? Because you trained as an actor, so, how did you get from all that reading and being in your mind, and how did you become an actor?

RW Well, I didn't formally train as an actor. I think I was sort of side-tracked with acting. I think if I can just take you back in time just a little bit, back to my school days. I remember this, I was in my last year at school when I was 15 or 16, the careers teachers come in, with the old obligatory, okay, what are you boys going to do when you leave school? And we had to sit down and fill in a form, and I wrote, I want to be a writer. I want to be a script writer. And then we hand the form in, and then we had to be quiet for a few minutes while she kind of went through them, and she used my form as an example. One boy doing it wrong. She didn't name me. She just said is, oh, this boy wants to be a script writer. I don't think that's very realistic. So, already at that time, we were written off. I mean, when I think about it now, I think, we were probably written off the very first day we stepped into that school. Never mind because I was Black, working-class. It was a sort of, typical run of the middle secondary school. Most of the kids, Black, White, Asian, the vast majority of us all grew up on neighbouring council estates along west London, and a great amount of us were written off. Just like, okay, one of you cannot be a writer, cannot be a playwright. Yeah, and I remember that, and the twist of that is she was Black.

PC I know sometimes there is this behaviour of thinking you're protecting a child, and actually you're doing far more harm.

RW That was all right.

PC That made me slightly angry listening to that. There's the maternal instinct, you know. I'm sure your mum would have waded in there if she'd heard something like that.

RW Mum did some weighing in, which I'll tell you about in a moment. I kind of got side-tracked by acting. There wasn't anyone telling me I could be a writer. There just wasn't anyone within my sphere, my world. But I saw Black people on TV acting, so, I thought, okay, I'll try that. I'll do that. And then I did A level theatre, and as well as studying plays, we also acted. We did plays, we acted, and I learned a lot about that. I did that during the day, and in the evenings, I went to a youth theatre in northwest London called the Cockpit. And we would meet every Wednesday, and we had a room upstairs. And sometimes we devised our own shows. Other times we had professional practitioners coming in to direct us to do other shows. And it was fun. It was really, really good. It was very sociable, really, really enjoyable. And that's kind of where I got the acting bug. And then from that, I auditioned for a young people's theatre company who were desperate. They were looking for a Black actor. I think some Black actor dropped out, and they needed someone very, very urgently. So, they rang around people and said, look, you know, these are days when [the] internet was a pipe dream it was all on phones. We need a young Black actor, who have you got? And then

the phone call made its way to the Cockpit. And then Stuart Bennett, who ran the theatre, said, oh well, actually, you know, there's a couple here. So, I'll tell them, and he told me and another guy. And then I auditioned, and then I got the part, I got the job. So, then I stayed with that company. I did one play with them, and then I stayed on, did another two got my Equity card. And I know if any millennials are listening, they would have no idea what an Equity card is. They'll know the union, but Equity Card, what's that? But trust me, that was like Charlie's Golden ticket back in the day. Got it and then I thought, okay, well, I'm a professional actor now. So, what do professional actors do? They audition. They go and get other jobs if they're lucky. So, I gave that a go for a couple of years and I got some jobs, lot of auditions but it wasn't fuelling me. I just knew very, very quickly, it wasn't my passion. It's not where I wanted to be. And when I was acting, I was working with a lot of really, really good writers. I was looking at them and the way they spoke in rehearsals and they would go off and do rewrites and such. And I was always thinking, I want to go with them. I want to do what they're doing. And I remember that Young People's Theatre Company in particular, they used to run an evening writer's group, and I asked if I could join. And the man running it was a wonderful writer, sadly no longer with us, called Noel Greg, who was quite amazing writer, but in sort of late 80's where political theatre was at its strongest. And that trickled down to the Young People's Theatre as well. And he was one of the co-founders of Gay Sweatshop, which was a gay theatre company, but very political, very left wing. He was a very sweet man, a very, very dear man. And I remember when I said to him, can I join your group? And he goes, why? I said, well, I want to be a playwright, I want to be a writer. And he sat me down and his wonderful smile and friendliness kind of disappeared. And he got really, really serious and stern with me. And I knew why he did that. He just sat me down and just said, okay, you need to tell me why you want to do this. And that's why he got serious with me. He just said, you know, I want to know why you want to be writer. I did answer the question as best as I could. And he said, okay, you can join and I did. So, I joined the group, and that's where my writing really started to stir. And I really thought, yeah, this is me. This is where I belong.

PW Fantastic.

PC That really is fantastic. Just those moments, those little catalytic moments that happen. This is a question I've been wanting to ask you for an awfully long time, so I've got a chance to ask it now.

RW Go for it.

PC What are the major themes that you explore in your work? Because some things seem to recur, and I'm really interested partly because in a far distant past I was an athlete and I love sport.

RW Oh, okay.

PC And sport features so much in your writing.

RW Yes.

PC Tell me the themes that interest you, and you explore in your writing.

RW Things that matter to me, particularly, as a Black man and as a Black writer. Race matters to me. It's something of concern to me, and it's complicated. You know, I've had experiences in my life that told me so. They've told me it's a very complicated beast, and I always feel compelled to want to write about it and pull it apart. Masculinity, toxic masculinity as well, means something to me again. It's something I've experienced. It's something I've seen, you know, not just with Black people, but

just everybody, really, just growing up. That's something I've been aware of and I've seen and I've felt and experienced. Those two main things matter to me. You know, so many others, family, identity, culture, cultural wars, the good stuff, they all matter to me. And I've got to feel it when I write, when I write my plays, I've got to feel something. And like I said, those subjects are really, really, I feel important. And I thought when I started, I was looking around, I thought no one, at least to my satisfaction, is writing about these. So, I thought, okay, well, I will.

PC Good. We needed it.

RW Thank you.

PC But the question of sport, which is what interests me, is sport is almost the same as theatre. You have a cast, you have an event, but even with an intermission.

RW Exactly. Exactly.

PC You know, and you may not know the result, but you know the arc of what's going to happen.

RW Yeah.

PC And so, is sport, therefore, a form that you use, like in Sucker Punch, No Boys Cricket Club. Is it a form that you use to explore other things?

RW It's particularly with football, I just find sport to be an extremely useful metaphor to tell the things I want to tell, particularly, with football, as you say, because it is almost like theatre. You got first act, second act, interval in the middle, and any good game of football, and they're hard to find, just like good theatre is hard to find, sometimes is unpredictable, and it's exciting. It takes your breath away.

PC And in Sing Your Heart Out for The Lads, it's almost as if you use football as a way of removing a layer of civility?

RW Yes, yeah.

PC To get to the raw sense of who your characters are?

RW Sing You Heart Out for The Lads, with respect to certain people, I would think it's less about racism, that play, but it's more about nationalism. I mean, obviously, racism and nationalism go very tightly together, but when I began to write that play, that was in my mind about nationalism and people's twisted ideas of what being a nationalist is and the extreme lengths people go to.

PC Well, you had me in tears. It's all your fault.

RW That was the plan. Sorry. It's about people's twisted notions of what it means to belong. And I love my football, and when I go to a football game, I've got a season ticket. I can scream and shout at a referee with the best of them. But I like to think I have limits. I like to think I know how far and when to go. And as much as I enjoy it, I won't die for it. I won't kill for it. And that's kind of what happens in the play. Sorry. People who haven't read it, spoilers.

PC Oh, no, there's way more to it than that. I mean, some of the speeches they rock you back. And the other thing I found interesting, sorry, I will soon move on.

RW No, it's all right.

PC Is the space in which it played made the play so different. When it was in a smaller space, there was an energy, the antagonism, that was completely different from when they were yelling at each other across a bigger stage, which, again, as a theatre person, I found fascinating.

RW Yeah. Well, thank you.

PW Can we talk about the relationship of the playwright to the producer, the dramaturg, the director and the actors? How do all these collaborate, how do all these relationships affect what you do in creating your work?

RW Well, they affect a great deal, but it can work out really, really well. As long as, everybody knows. I mean, that list you just gave, everyone knows who they are and what they do. I feel in today's climate, in theatre, there's confusion in terms of those roles you described, they kind of overlap with each other. And I think there needs to be a conversation about clarity in terms of, what exactly is a dramaturge in your theatre building. What do they do? If you're a theatre, you don't have to be a new writing theatre. But if you are doing new writing, then I think, I feel there needs to be a stronger clarity in terms of what dramaturge does. I've been doing this for 25 years. I'm still a little unclear in terms of what exactly is a dramaturgy. Is it the same as a literary manager? I don't believe so. But I think there's some sort of confusion, and sometimes I feel certain dramaturgs I've met, they're doing the job of literary manager, and I just think that's not quite how it works. And maybe they just, that's one example...I just feel we need to be very clear in terms of what is everybody's job? I mean, I know what role of producer, director and a dramaturg is, but, I think it just needs to be...you know, I think there's a lot of cloud and it needs to be sort of cleared, I would say. But producer, I think that's your first point of contact. They're the ones who may do the approach and say, okay, we like you. We like your work, come and write for us. And so, they bring you into the building, and you get a sense of the building and the work they do, and also, hopefully, you get a sense of what they want from you. When I say this, I'm saying this is the ideal world. It's a lot different now, but ultimately, that is it. The dramaturg, in my opinion, is someone who kind of bridges the gap between you and the theatre. You meet with them. How you're doing? Can I read certain drafts? They're there to help you. There to help guide you with your piece, and then you maybe, mutually agree, okay, this is the draft I feel is ready for the powers that be to have a look at. I feel that's the role of a dramaturge, and I'm not quite seeing that in the way things are at the moment. Well, I'm certainly not hearing that from my fellow playwrights. I think there is a confusion, but that's kind of where I come at. That's how I feel in dramaturge was. Having a director, I find that self-explanatory, what they do. They're the ones who are responsible for getting your play up on its feet, giving it life with the actors. And that's the part I always enjoyed. I love a rehearsal.

PW I was going to say, do you enjoy being in the rehearsal room and hearing your words?

RW Yeah, it's great, particularly if that's the first time you heard the words come to life. And I always want the actors to...I'm always asked, they always say, is it as you imagined? And I always say, no. And sometimes they take it, oh, okay. And I said, no, no, no, you don't understand, as you cannot possibly replicate how it is in my head. I don't want you to. I want you to make it yours. I want it to sound better because it's for you. I want you to really do well with it and do things. I want to sit down and think, wow, I've never heard it said like that before. And those are things I look for,

and I dream for it. And if you get the right director, more importantly, you get the right cast, they'll do that for you.

PC Yes. And it's wonderful, isn't it? I mean, occasionally you come across a line and you note to yourself, it's a little bit flabby.

RW Yes.

PC I could have cut that.

RW Yes. Oh, yeah.

PC What is lovely, I think, is when you can trust directors and actors. I so admire actors. You know, and they test your work.

RW The best ones do. I mean, I've often done Q&A's and sessions with younger actors, particularly drama students, and the phrase I always say to them is, look, the script is not your enemy, it's your best friend. It loves you; it needs you. So, bear that in mind when you get a script. Don't see it as a struggle; and ask the writer questions. And I think those are the best actors I feel I love to work with. And I think they always, do good stuff when they ask questions. Just say, Roy, I don't understand this line rather than saying, I don't want to do that line, or even shock, horror, and some have done it in the past, where they cut my line out or say it another way. I don't mind them doing that, but run it by me first, please.

PC But it's also that sometimes that line pays off 10 lines down the page.

RW Yeah, exactly.

PC I think that's the glory of working with radio actors as well. They have to come in with something and then they're immediately flexible about what they do, which is because we both work in that area.

RW Yes, we do.

PC That's one of the joys of it.

PC Were there playwrights that were influential?

RW They were. There was a couple, there's one in particular, called Barry Keefe, who's very influential to me. Again, he's another writer, sadly, he passed away. I think he was well known. In the late 70's he captured the voice of the White and Black working-class in England. I saw in his work, their angst, their anger, their uncertainty. I was one of those boys who was written off. I would read them and just, wow, this is me. This is the world he's writing about. And that was a really key thing. That [was] another key thing that got me into theatre.

PC It seems we share a mutual acquaintance, Don Kinch?

RW Yeah.

PC Who is one of the OGs of Black theatre.

RW Yeah. We met because there's a bit of a story to this. I was about 10 or 11 at school and it was at a time when there was a real concern from Black parents up and down the country about the level of education, they thought their children were getting, or poor education. And they thought, you know, it was racist the way Black kids, particularly Black boys, have been singled out, picked on and just excluded. And they weren't happy. They weren't happy at all. And all of a sudden, these Saturday schools popped up around the country, very informal schools, and sometimes it'd be people's houses in their living rooms, in their kitchens. Don was a mutual friend of my sister, and I would go to his house, his flat in Holland Park, and I just go there every Saturday until my grades at school picked up and my mum left me with a very sort of stark choice. It was either that go to Saturday school, get your school grades picked up, no more fooling around, because I was fooling around and being very easily led, or she was going to send me to live with relatives in Jamaica. She was not joking. And so, I thought, okay, well, I'll go to Saturday school. I did that, and it was just great. And I learned more there than I ever did at school, because after a while, it became less about my Maths homework, or the English homework, or the history homework, or what have you. Don and I would just sit around his table, and we just talk about what it means to be young and Black in the 70's and 80's stuff I couldn't get school, I wasn't getting on, but I was getting it all from him. And then other Black kids with similar stories to mine joined, and it became a much wider discussion. And then, also, interesting enough, there was times when Don had to work with actors because he was, I mean, he was a jack of all trades.

PC Yeah, he was.

RW He was a writer, actor, director. So, sometimes Saturdays, when the actors were rehearsing one of his plays, I would tag along. I would go and watch them perform and I loved it. I loved it. I mean, they were older than me. For a 10-year-old, they seemed like gods, when I think about, I think they probably weren't that much older than me, probably 10 or 12 years older than me, but I loved being in their company. They were funny, and they were so loud, and I would join in in the warm ups. I would make tea and coffee during coffee breaks, and sometimes I would read in if an actor who didn't show up or was running late. And I just thought, this is a great way to spend a Saturday. And that was real, I would say that was one of the experiences when theatre really got its hooks into me.

PC Now, this is a question that we ask all the people that we've spoken to. When did you first call yourself a writer, a playwright? Take the title unto yourself.

RW I think I called myself a writer first, before I called myself a playwright. It took a while. It really did. I think by the time I did my third play that was on at the Royal Court called Lift Off. I think that is when I finally called myself [a playwright]—

PC A play at the Royal Court?

RW I was very hesitant about telling my family, they all came to everything. But I was very hesitant about telling close-knit friends, people, particularly ones who are outside the theatre world, who have little knowledge about how it all works. So, before then, they would say, hi, Roy, how are you doing? and I always fudged it, I was just, oh, yeah, well, I'm doing a bit of writing and, you know, teaching.

PC So, this is the next part of the question. So, what does it mean to be a writer? Is there a kind of status you're taking on to yourself when you do it?

RW It means a heck of a lot to me because I think, of the young Roy who sat and watched all these mates, being good at this, being good at that. And I was thinking, some are good at music, some are good at dancing, some are good at football and such. And I was sitting there just thinking, okay, what am I good at? Where's my, forgive the term, where's my destiny? What is my destiny? And I finally found it in writing. But again, it took me a while to just cough up and just say, oh, for goodness sake, just say you're a writer.

PC But it's also theatre has a really particular it's not prestige. It's almost a kind of snobbery that it's a very elite part of British culture. So, when you say that you are a playwright, you're actually claiming a territory that not many people have.

RW I think what made it easier, because I remember it wasn't long before when I had my play at the Royal Court. I remember I was at college at the time, I was at Rose Bruford. And I remember it made stories. You know, Stephen Daldry, who ran the Royal Court, suddenly he found this generation of writers, young writers, and we're talking the likes of Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, Jez Butterworth, Martin McDonough, those guys. And they were all having plays on at the Royal Court. So, it really felt like, oh, there's a real writing playwright revolution. Because I think before then, the stereotype of a playwright was White, middle-aged man sitting behind a desk with a typewriter, and right next to him is an ashtray of overflowing of cigarette butts.

PC And Shakespeare on his side.

RW Yeah, exactly.

RW And these playwrights just changed all of that. So, by the time my play was on at the Royal Court, I was kind of part of the first, the second or third wave, this new generation of playwrights. And I got quite a thrill, quite a kick seeing my name printed in newspapers. It was the first time ever. So, yeah, that's when I felt, yeah, I'm a writer because, you know, it says so in that paper.

PW Can we talk about being a black writer now? Is that a label that you accept or reject or how do you feel about that?

RW It's something I've struggled with in the past. I remember when my first play came out, I remember there was a Q&A for one of them, and someone asked me, I can't remember the exact question, but it was something on the lines of, don't you feel you have a responsibility as a Black playwright to have your characters present in a more positive light. And the reason why he asked that, because that was my first play, No Boys Cricket Club, at Stratford East. And in one scene in the play, because the play is about middle-aged woman looking back on her life, and she has tense exchange with her son, who's been dealing drugs, and in the course of the argument, he hits her. And if you've ever been to Stratford East, you know the audience can be quite lively.

PW Lively.

RW Lively. So, when that happened, they were lively X plus. And yeah, there was one night where we had a Q&A, and that question came out, and I think someone did ask me, as a Black writer, don't you feel you have a responsibility? And my inexperience didn't allow me to answer that question. And ever since then, not now, but, for a couple of years afterwards, when I did my second play and the third play, I dreaded the Q&As because I thought, someone's going to ask me that question. And sure enough, they did. Are you a Black writer, or are you just a writer? And I couldn't articulate my answer. I knew what it was, but I couldn't quite articulate. And also, I was scared to because I

thought, okay, if I say the wrong thing, am I going to get shot down for it? would it be a nightmare? And then I can't remember where I found it. There was an article written by one of my favourite poets, Langston Hughes, and he wrote this article, amazingly, in 1926, and it's called The Negro Artist in the Racial Mountain. And he's speaking about his experiences when he was in Harlem, in New York. A young Black man approached him and said, oh, Mr. Hughes, you know, I really admire your work. I want to be like you. I want to be a poet. I don't want to be a black poet. I just want to be a poet. And Mr. Hughes turned on this guy and said, why do you want to do that? Why do you want to be a poet and not Black poet? What is wrong with being a Black poet? You are Black and you're a poet. Why can't you be both? And his argument to this young man was, for you to say you want to be a poet, that means you want to be a White poet. You want to be with a cultural majority. You don't want to be yourself. You don't want to be who you are. You don't want to be who you look at in the mirror every day, every morning. What's wrong with you? And he was quite harsh on this guy. But when I read that, oh, it was a blessing, because I thought, oh, thank you, Mr. Hughes. Thank you. Now I know how I can answer that question. Just cleared up a lot of things in my head and from then, since I read it, I had a lot more confidence. So, that when people say, how do you see yourself, as a writer, as a Black writer? I say, I'm a Black writer. I know a lot of my friends who are of colour, who are actors, they don't like being [classed as Black actors], and I get that why they do. I just think it's slightly different for writers. And again, this is what Hughes was trying to teach this young man. He said, is, to be black is not limited, it is limitless. You can write about whatever you want as a Black person, because that's your experience as a Black person. There's no one definition of being Black. And again, like I said, that just helped me enormously. I just thought, yeah, now I know, I know, and I can wear that with pride. And I'm very proud that I call myself a Black writer.

PC It's interesting, isn't it? The subliminal implication that somehow black is less, yes, as soon as you remove that, you then celebrate what it means, and it gives you additional power.

RW And it's different. I remember several years, whenever the subject about Black theatre came up in any newspapers, it was always me, Kwame, and Debbie, Debbie Tucker Green, we were always the three. And by then I'd seen Kwame's work and Debbie's work, and even though, yeah, there were some themes that were similar, but all three of us are extremely different writers. I couldn't write the way Debbie writes, and with respect, and she couldn't write the way I write, and that's the way it should be. That's definitely the way it should be. three of us have similar takes on the world we're living in, but just done in very, very different styles, and that's the way it should be. It's not rocket science.

PC Which is why I love ideas. You get a good one in your head, and it just explodes. You've written for stage. You've written for radio. You've written for television. So, when you were moving between them, how did you find the transitions? Did you do extra training? How did you...?

RW Not extra training. No. I mean, you just got to learn on the job, really.

PC You got to get the job first.

RW Yeah. You got to get the job. Exactly. TV, you have to jump through a lot of more hoops. There's a lot more people, you have to please as well. And in film, I've written for film as well, you learn very, very quickly that, unlike theatre, you're not the centre of everything. You're just not, you're part of it, and you're an important part, but you're not the be all, end all. I think as long as you go in knowing that, you should be okay. But, like I said, there's a lot of learning on the job.

PC Are there certain commonalities sort of plot, character? Are there things that you think carry over from one form to another?

RW Oh, yeah, yeah. I mean, I like to think that's the reason why I'm in the room with them, because I've got many offers of TV work and film work based on what I've written in the theatre. It's almost as if they're on the hunt for writers. And then the first port of call they go to is the theatre.

PC So, it prompts the question, so, what do you say no to, then?

RW I don't want to say.

PC You can give it a general description.

RW Well, put this way. Not easy. The ones I've said no to, it's not been easy because at the end of the day, I'm still a writer, I'm still a self-employed writer.

PW And TV is fairly well paid, isn't it?

RW It is, but it's not going to make you rich. A good TV gig will keep the wolf on the door for a couple of years, maybe, if you're lucky. But, yeah, it's not going to change your life. It's not going to buy you that holiday in the Bahamas, or should I say, buy you that apartment in the Bahamas.

PW Which of your plays still resonate with you now? Is there a play or character that sits in your head?

RW What plays resonate with me now? You're almost like asking me, who my favourite, which one's my favourite play?

PW We didn't want to say those words, but kind of.

RW Well, I think I'm surprised how some plays resonate more than others. I never thought honestly, I never thought *Sing Your Heart Out for the Lads* would be done again. When I did it first in the national, I just thought, first of all, practical reasons, because it's a big cast, but also just I suppose maybe I naively felt the themes I was writing about, maybe things will be better by now, but they're not. And so, that's still in the world we're living in now, particularly post-Brexit, and still the whole debate about nationalism and racism to a certain degree, that makes that play still relevant. And I suppose, that play, because of, in light of what's been happening in this country the last few years, I think that play still resonates with me still.

PW And what about the recent trilogy of plays that you did with Clint Dyer? *Death of England*?

RW *Death of England*. Well, they're similar. It's a similar theme to *Sing Your Heart Out for the Lads* in terms of nationalism. But I like to think we've gone a little bit deeper, more personal. I know we surprised a lot of people, two Black guys writing a play about a White working-class man who, on a level, could be seen as being racist, but there's a lot more complexity about that. He's living in a post-Brexit world, that character. His father died and he's, questioning a lot. I felt he's a metaphor for, the United Kingdom at the time and was like, okay, who are we? What kind of United Kingdom are we? And he was going through that struggle because on a level, he grew up with a racist father, and then after the father died, he finds out certain things about his dad he never knew. That really

makes him, wow, I don't know who I am anymore. I really, really don't. So, that's a personal thing. Like I said, I think we mess a lot with a lot of people's heads, and I'm glad we did that.

PW Yeah, that's good.

RW Good.

PC That's what I think that's what good theatre should do.

RW Exactly. Exactly. Don't make a judgment because we're two Black guys, and you just think, well, they can't write about a White working-class guy. And I said, well, why not? Why not? If you feel it, you can write it. That's my new sentence. I say to young writers, when they often ask me, oh, I don't know what to write about, da, da, da, da. Should I be writing this story even though it's outside my own experience or my own, class or whatever?

PC And gender. Because you write really good women, and I say this as a woman playwright.

RW Well, thank you. Thank you. You know, I would just say, if you feel it, write it.

PW So, how would you characterise your career now? What stage would you say you're at?

RW Quite an interesting stage. I'm older than I was starting out. I mean, I look back with surprises. I think, wow, 25 years, and just, God, how quickly that's gone.

PW You're quite prolific, really, aren't you?

RW Yeah. Yeah. Am I a workaholic? Somebody asked me that. I said, I don't know. Maybe I am. Maybe I am, you know, because I love this job. I love doing it, and I don't want to lose it. And I just always feel I just got to, since one's finished, I just want to quickly get to the next. I don't ever want to relax and take anything for granted. And I think it's got a lot to do with me being a Black person, really. I think we just got that kind of work drive within us to do well, because it was always a thing that the previous job could be our last. You just want to stay in the game as much as possible. So, I suppose that's what's driving me. But, yeah, I'm older than I was, I do think because of the last five years, I lost my parents. Dad went first, although, as I said, he played no part whatsoever in my life. I didn't meet him until I was 39, so how I dealt with his death was very different to how I dealt with when we lost mum a year later, because she was everything to us, everything to me. She raised us all by herself and then my mum particularly, I suppose you could say she was part of the Windrush generation. She came to this country 1959. My dad came first, you know, the usual dads came first, and then the wives come over, and then they send for the kids, and then they have kids here. So, when my mum passed a year after the Windrush celebration, it was also in the same airtime as the dreadful Windrush scandal. Everything that went on with that. And then my mum passed, and then, I remember this at a funeral. It's kind of just feeling, wow, we're the second generation, but we're the old farts now. We are a lot older than our parents were when they came here. We're the elders now.

PW That's very scary.

RW Terrifying. And then I look at my brother's kids and my sister's kids, and they're the next generation. They're the third generation. And it just got me asking questions. It just got made me think, okay, how do they feel about us? Are they as angry and frustrated with us as we were at times with our parents? So, that's where I'm at, at the moment with my writing. I'm exploring that

world, that world of the second generation who are getting older. And, who are we? What's our place? What's going on with us? What we feel and what we're thinking? And that's feeding me at the moment. I think I'm good to go with a couple of plays and new stuff to write about that's set within that world. So, that's where I'm at as a playwright at this moment.

PW Are you commissioned a lot, or do you just write and then you have an agent [to submit your scripts.]

RW I'm still commissioned. I'm still not quite one of those. And I know some of my writers, playwright, colleagues who can afford to write a play on spec and just, you know, sell it. I'm not there yet. I'm still not there. I still rely on the old-fashioned commissioning.

PC Yeah. Very practical.

RW Yeah.

PC What you're saying is that sense of the generations that are coming, there are people in this society who have generational wealth and they can afford to sit back and write plays and do things on spec. Whereas I think I've always also, like you, have been commissioned. I don't think I've ever written any one play on spec.

RW I don't want this to sound heavy handed or I'm being angry and bitter, but I do believe that does have something to do with the fact that I'm Black.

PC Yeah. That you're leading me to perfectly to the next question, which is, you always give back, you mentor, you encourage. Tell us a little bit about that and why you do it?

RW I help run a writer's group at Hampshire Theatre called Inspire, and it was setup about five years ago when Ed Hall ran the theatre, and he wanted to have the presence of a writers group there and me to help set it up. So, we did, and it's quite simple, really. Each year the group gets bigger and bigger and older as well, and we just meet, and they all come in with one play they want to write over the course of the year, and at the end of the year, it's considered for production by Hamstead. And if not, they can go out and sell it somewhere else. My job, I just have a monthly meeting with them. Just say, how's it going? You're okay? Anything you want me to do for you? Blah, blah, blah. But more importantly, I get guest speakers to come in and talk to them. And they're mostly playwrights, and they just share stuff about. So, it's a really relaxed sort of Q&A environment and friendly. I like to do it. For me, it's not paying it back. It's kind of paying it forward. I had wonderful mentors such as Noel Greg, and also, another wonderful writer who sadly no longer with us was Stephen Jeffries, who was the literally associate at the Royal Court. You will struggle to hear a bad word said about him from a generation of playwrights because that's what he did.

PC He let me do his playwriting course for free. When I just came here.

RW That's so him. That's so him.

PC He was just amazing person.

RW And he did I like to think, what I'm doing with the writer's group at Inspire. He just thought, are you okay? How's it going? Let's go and have lunch. Talk to me about your play, Roy. How's it going for you? And so on. He was just a writer's, best buddy.

PC Yeah. Makes a huge difference.

RW He was wonderful.

PW So, what lessons have you learned along the way that you can pass on to the next generation?

RW Oh, God.

PW Tell us about some of the obstacles maybe that you faced and that you had to overcome.

RW Well, other than the ones at school, like I said, my experience with a careers teacher who said, that's not realistic, I would say to any young writers who are hearing me right now, well, get those people get those people's voices out of your head as soon as possible. Ignore all of that because they're not helping you. They're holding you back. Do not let them. I think I've read somewhere once, it's a very funny quote, if someone's trying to put you in a box, you are more than justified to pick up that box and beat them up with it. I'm editing that as I say, it's a lot more fruity expression of that story, but you get the gist.

PW Yes, absolutely. Is there anything that you would do differently, do you think, during your career?

RW You mean, like, if I knew then what I know now kind of thing?

PW Yeah.

RW No, not really. I just feel everything's happened for a reason, I would say.

RW I don't know if I would ever do anything differently I've taken a couple of wrong steps, but I've always learnt. I like to think I've always learned from those mistakes that I've made. Not just writing, but just, in a personal level as well. So, I don't think I'd want to go back and change it if I was able to. No.

PC Good. I think that's really positive.

RW Yeah, I think so.

PC Do it your way. Do it good.

RW Yeah. Exactly. Just, you know.

PW What do you think the future holds for writers and writing?

RW Oh, it's a tricky one. It's a tricky future, I would say, for a variety of reasons. But I do feel and it's not just because of what's been happening in the world, with the lockdown pandemic. I think a lot of concerns about how playwrights and how they fit in, because I keep hearing so many awful stories about the way they feel, the way they've been treated by theatres, and ghosted as well. You know, that's a sort of common phrase at the moment, where they just feel ignored for various reasons, they don't have their plays put on, blah, blah, blah. That's worrying. That's a concern. I think it feels like we need to move from a theatre world that likes writers to a theatre world that loves writers, that needs writers. There's the strike in America because I think they're going to win, because they are so needed and so important. They're on strike and Hollywood has shut down. And for me, that just shows that's how strong we are, we are needed. And people want our stories whether they realise it or not. Because I think everybody needs to be. I've learned this from a young age, from

when I started. It's just what I felt for, pretty much all my life is we all want to sit around a proverbial fire and have a story being told to us. And we want to gasp. We want to laugh, we want to cry. Yeah. We need that. And if it's felt over the last few years, theatre doesn't quite trust the writers, the playwrights to do that, I think that's bonkers, that's absolutely bonkers. Stop trying to curate us, I would say, and trust us. Let us tell our stories. Let them breathe, you know, whoever they are. Let them. That's a wider thing in terms of being more specific about writers of colour at the moment. I think on the surface, it's healthy. We're in a good place. And it really warms my soul when I see people like Ryan. Ryan Calais Cameron doing so well. Tyrell Williams, Jasmin Lee Jones, who wrote Seven Methods of Killing Kylie Jenner in the Royal Court and so many others. I just, wow, this is good. And all the writers that Lynette [Linton] is finding at the Bush Theatre as well, that's really, really good. But we should not be patting anybody on the back, because the minute we do that, that's when they stop. And by the time they finish patting themselves on the back, five years have passed when nothing has happened. So, we can't let the powers that be off the hook. Yes, it's great, but I want more. I want more, more, more.

PC Pauline and I have a discussion frequently that there's a tendency to want to put on one-handers or two-handers, and very much that first blurt play that young playwrights do, which is about colourism or some sort of inner angst. But what I don't see often with people who don't have your determination is a path.

RW Yeah, yeah, it's funny because I remember when I started, in a weird way, my naivety helped me because I remember when I was at college, when I wrote my first play, No Boys Cricket Club, it was a, cast of 13 predominantly Black women. And when I was writing, I thought, well, no one's going to put this on. No one's going to see it. So, write what I want and hopefully get a good mark for it and I got a good mark. And then my tutor at college, Gilly, a woman called Gilly Fraser, she said, Roy, you should send this to theatres. I said, really? She says, yeah, even if they don't put it on, but I think it's a really good calling card for you.

PC Yeah. Get on the radar.

RW And I gave it in, and then Stratford East completely slapped me when they said, we want to do it, and they did.

PC Is that Kerry Michaels leadership?

RW No, it's Philip Headley.

PC Oh, Philip Headley. Okay.

RW Yeah. I mean, it's just unprecedented. They put on the play delivered in a brown envelope by someone they never heard of, and then six months later, they're programming it. What the hell? And I want to hear more of those kinds of stories.

PC Yes.

RW And also, writers being encouraged to think big. I mean, I was part of a group a few years back, of fellow minded playwrights. We called ourselves The Monsterists, and we did a little campaign to encourage theatres to commission writers to write bigger plays. There's nothing wrong with two **rounders**, nothing wrong with one hand, I mean.

PC No. No, no. But absolutely, in terms of your craft, you should be able to write what it is you're most comfortable.

RW Exactly. Exactly. And that conversation between theatres and writers, I'm just not hearing, hearing about. I suppose one of the reasons why it's just costs and everyone's trying to survive.

PC Money and risk

RW Money and risk.

PC And what they will do is go for a safe script because they know they will get a certain percentage of audience.

RW But that's going to come back and bite them on the arse.

PC Yeah.

RW If they carry on doing that. I get that. But, you know, you got to do the other, you got to dot he other (Overlapping Conversation)

PC Yeah, because what it is, is a spiral. It gets smaller and smaller, and then, in fact, you're not refreshing it with anything.

RW And I shudder to imagine what theatre will look like if that route continues. Yes, I get it, I get it. Even a theatre like the Royal Court. I get maybe at times they need to have their commercial heads on. I understand that. Do what you have to do but do the other as well. Please find a way.

PW Can we talk about AI?

RW Oh, AI.

PW And is it a threat?

RW It's a threat, but it's also just bloody stupid.

PW In what way?

RW No script will ever be as good as if it's written by somebody who actually has a heartbeat, who exists. Because with them, you'll get the nuances, you'll get the complication and everything, and AI can't do that. It just can't.

PC What you'll get is probably a great deal of quite adequate mediocrity.

RW Yeah.

PC Which means that we, as playwrights, become more artisan to some extent. So, it's the quality of what we produce.

RW Yeah. I've got no time for it.

PC And it has no empathy.

RW It has no empathy. I've got no time for it. And, you know, yuck, it makes me ill.

PC And interesting, visibly, when you see the visual images that they generate, you can almost pick it up immediately. And I can say this, and it'll probably be cut out. The Abba Show creeped me out because I thought, we have live performers who can deliver all of this stuff. Why are we? Yes. Anyway, finally I get to ask.

RW Be gone AI, be gone. Yeah.

PC We'll find a way to make it work for us. Yeah, I'm with you on that one. Final question and I bagged it because I wanted to ask it. At the end, we always ask, what are the best things about being Roy Samuel Williams?

RW Oh, the best thing about being me?

PC You can have more than one.

RW Okay. Best things about being me. One is I think I'm still here.

PW Yay.

RW I'm still doing what I wanted to do since I was 14. I think that's the best thing about me. It hasn't been easy. It hasn't been difficult. And, for anyone listening, it's not going to be easy for you either but, if it's your passion, you'll do it. If you're a writer, it's because you don't know how not to be one. And I think that's the best thing about me, because I don't know how not to be a writer. I tried doing other stuff. I even freakishly at the age of 18, almost joined the army. What was I thinking but, the little voice, in me, was like, are you mad? Get out. Get out of there, you know.

PC You didn't?

RW No.

PC You're here now.

PW I don't know if it's a playwright thing, but there seems to be a terminal modesty. I would say that your craft is at a point where you seem very confident in your craft, and that doesn't come easily. That's over the 25 years. So, if I was Roy Williams, I would have celebrated that.

RW Oh, okay, I'll take that. I'll take that. On one level, I'm confident, but you haven't seen me in my room. When a certain script is just not panning out, not working, I can go crazy with the best of them. Actually, it's a bit perverse to say this, but I kind of enjoy that. You know, if it was easy, then I'd be really, really worried. Every play I've ever written, I always reach that part when I just think, oh, my God, I'm never going to get this play finished. It's funny, one of my successful plays, Sucker Punch, I can still remember there was a time when I thought I was never going to get that. I was never going to finish it. I was never going to get it right. And I remember so many times when I'd write a draft, put it in the proverbial bottom draw, take it out a few months later, try again, and so on, so on and so on. There's a good few years when I really thought, I'm never going to do it. I'm never going to finish this play. But somehow, I think just one summer, it was 2009, I just took it and I just went for it. I just didn't think, I just went for it, and I was able to finish a draft. Thank God.

PC Interesting. There is a recent occurrence where two of your plays are running in the same theatre.

RW Yeah.

PC That might be something worth celebrating.

RW Oh, I went up there because I just thought, I'm not missing this. It was an incredible experience. It was at The Lowry in Salford, that was pretty special.

PC It was Sucker Punch?

RW It was Sucker Punch. It's a revival, Sucker Punch. First time since Royal Court it's been done in this country. It's been done in America a few times. Strangely enough. Well, I wouldn't say strange. That's not fair statement, but interesting enough, it's been done. And my adaptation of Michael Rosen's amazing book, Unexpected Twist, and for some reason, and they just happened to be touring, and they all met at The Lowry in Salford, and I just thought, wow, that's never happened to me before. I take a lot of pride in that.

PW Well, thank you so much.

RW My pleasure.

PW Roy Samuel Williams.

RW Thank you. Thank you.

PW Do check with our website, theamplifyproject.co.uk for other podcasts in the series and for further information about Black British writing.

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