



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Pauline Walker and Ben Tagoe.

Patricia Cumper

Ben Tagoe is a Ghanaian Scottish writer. He lived in Perth before relocating to Leeds. His writing career took off when a cancelled train from Leeds back to Edinburgh led him to a night out at an open mic night. Inspired, within months, he quit his job to try his hand at writing. He's written for some of Britain's most popular primetime shows, including EastEnders, Coronation Street, Casualty, In The Long Run and Stan Lee's Lucky man, writing for children's drama Jamie Johnston. His episode Endgame was shortlisted for the children's BAFTA, International Emmys and Royal Television Society Awards. He's currently adapting two novels for film, is writing a play for the National Theatre of Scotland, and his one man play, Better Days, is on at this year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Ben Tagoe, welcome to The Amplify Project.

Ben Tagoe Thank you very much.

PC Good. I get to ask the first question, really simple one. When did words and stories come into your life?

BT I mean, on a personal level as far back as I can remember, it was really music for me. I was always fascinated by song lyrics from a very young age. I grew up in the house with a lot of music. My dad's still got a brilliant vinyl collection and I remember sitting, writing song lyrics out, and like stopping cassettes and things, and rewinding them to catch each line and things like that. So, I think I always had more of a sort of appreciation for lyrics than most people. And I loved writing at school, but I didn't grow up in a world where anybody who worked in television so, it never occurred to me it would be a career. But I think I've always had that awareness.

PC And what about stories? Like, I don't know, books, films?

BT I was always a big reader. And I loved television when I was a kid, Grange Hill and all those kinds of shows in the 80s, and I loved all that stuff. So, we were a real TV watching house and looking back things like, Desmond's, for example, was a bit of a TV event in our house. And, the Cosby Show was massive as well, particularly up in Scotland, where you didn't always see a lot of people who looked like you, and there wasn't that many people on TV, so, those kind of things were quite big, but not just those shows. My mum and dad still watch EastEnders, never miss it. And my dad was a community health visitor and some of the stories in EastEnders would have conversations with mums. I think there was a cot death story in the 80's. It was a massive thing and that was for him, something that he used in his work. So, yeah, we were a big TV watching household, definitely.

PW I loved TV when I was growing up. That and a book. Let's talk about the night that your train was cancelled from Leeds back to Edinburgh. Tell us that story.

BT It was one of those sliding doors moments, I suppose, but I was working at the time. I had a client in Leeds. I used to go down regularly, normally I used to drive, but this particular time, I got the train. I think I might have had a hangover or something. I just couldn't face the drive, so, I got the train down and it was February, weather was really bad, and I ended up stranded in Leeds. They cancelled all the trains home. It was really, as close as you get to a hurricane in Leeds. In Yorkshire, there was a guy I knew who was studying at Leeds College of Music, doing a jazz course there. He was a friend of my sisters who became a good friend of mine, and I ended up going on a night out with him and went to this open mic night, which was mainly music, to be fair. But I met a lot of writers and was really unhappy in my job at the time and really was looking for, I think, a creative outlet without realising that's probably what I was looking for. And I woke up in a hotel room the next day, ready to finally get the train back home and just started looking at writing courses. I wanted to find something I could do that wouldn't involve me taking years to retrain before I could even get to a degree. And I don't know, I just felt like I'd never really written. I was 26 at that point, I'd never really written anything. And then I looked, and it just so happened that there was a really good creative writing degree course at Leeds University. I did think about Manchester. I've got a cousin there who I'm very close to. I ended up applying for the Leeds. It was quite close to the deadline, so, I had no portfolio or anything, so, I had to think, what can I get quickly, what can I make quickly to do this application? So, I ended up writing a few poems, and a short story so that I had a "portfolio", which was basically something I put together in a few days or a week or however long it was, made the deadline, had to go down for an interview and then got a place. So, within a few months, I'd sold my flat and moved down to Leeds and started this creative writing degree. At that point, I thought I was probably going to be a novelist. Or as much as I appreciate poetry, I never thought that was - but it was just short form, easy thing get so, I could actually apply. I went down thinking I might be a no, because, like the earlier question I always loved books. I used to go to the library a lot so, I thought I might end up trying to be a novelist or whatever. I just wanted to go and do something that wasn't the job I was doing at the time I think it was February that happened and by July the 4th, actually, I moved down to Leeds.

PW Was that scary or more exciting?

BT I don't think it was necessarily scary, I just remember a feeling of relief when I left my job at the time and I had a little period, I moved back home for a month or two before it was time, to move to Leeds and just regrouped a bit. So, I think I was ready. I was ready for a change, ready for something new and, a lot of the people I met on that first night became friends for the next few years and, I met my son's mum through that circle and all that kind of thing. Sometimes you've just got to go for things and follow the path that appears to be opening up in front of you and see what happens.

PW And what did your parents think, you were chucking in your job?

BT I'd travelled around Europe before, I'd been here and there. I wasn't particularly settled, but I think they probably at that point I'd just bought my first flat in Edinburgh, and I had a reasonably well-paid job and stuff. So, certainly I remember my dad being a bit puzzled by this decision that his 26-year-old son had decided that he wanted something else. I was reasonably successful in some terms; you know what I mean? But no, I remember my dad sort of quizzing me. Quiz is probably a polite way of putting it. He was not particularly impressed, he just didn't get it. I think my dad changed a lot down the years, but he came here to work, you know what I mean? And he came here to train and work and he had the same career for 40 years and probably quite a classic immigrant mentality. I don't want to say that in terms of there's one sort of homogeneous thing there, but certainly I think there is a certain mindset that is frivolous things like giving up your well-paid job in your 20's to go off and

be a writer which is a very uncertain career, I think he was aware of that, is not necessarily the done thing.

PC You're absolutely right.

PW So, you studied at a place called Bretton Hall, and while you were there, you were a runner up in the Alfred Bradley Bursary Radio Drama Competition. What difference did that acknowledgement make?

BT Without realising at the time, probably quite a big difference. In a way, it was maybe a wee bit unhelpful as well because it was the first thing I'd ever sent anywhere and to get money, it was like not a lot, but it was a few hundred quid or something because I didn't win the outright, there was one, the outright prize was you got your play produced. Mine was I got a bit of money. I can't even remember how much it was. It was a few hundred quid. And I got assigned a mentor at BBC Radio Four and all that kind of stuff. And I just thought, oh, this is great. You write stuff, you send it off, they send you money, you get a little bit of praise and attention. This is brilliant. I'll just do this and then never got anywhere for years after that, so. I think probably in one level, I think at that time, it seems like so long ago because it was 20 years ago, actually. Yeah, 20 years this year. I think at the time as I think back, there might have been times in the years afterwards when things weren't going quite so well that I maybe did think, you must be able to do this. So, I kind of not peaked, but I went in at quite a high level and then had a big, long dip after that really.

PC So, the affirmation is important, though, I think in your early career?

BT I think it becomes less important. Yeah, early career, more so. I think that initial affirmation verification that you could do this to some level that might put food on the table, albeit not that much food off that particular cheque. But it was nice, I was a student that had I think it was 2003, so, it was second year at university that year, yeah.

PC So, here's the big question now. When did you start thinking of yourself as a writer? And when did you kind of think it was worth giving up the job to pursue this? Was there a particular moment?

BT Well, I'd already given up the job before I started to think of myself as a writer. I just wanted to go and do something. So, it was different for me in that sense. While I was at university, I had a really good mate of mine who worked in the advertising agency, marketing world, and I started doing some copywriting stuff for his company in Manchester, which I'd never really done before. So, I started to think to myself, right, well, this might be a better, more fulfilling job and I actually quite enjoyed that. So, I started doing that freelance while I was at uni. So, I was doing that writing, and that was the first job I ever did in that world was ghost writing a sports betting column for the regional director of Ladbrooks in the north of England at the time. And my mate's company, they were a full-service marketing agency and did PR and all that stuff. And there was nobody in his office that liked football. And they wanted a Friday football betting column that was meant to be written by the, I don't know if I'm giving away secrets here, it doesn't really matter if I am but, I was doing that stuff and then I graduated from uni. And I think the first time I probably started to feel that I could describe myself as a dramatic writer, was years later, before I had any other sort of income from dramatic writing. And then my first professional commission was in 2010, so, it was five years after I'd graduated from uni. And I think at that point, maybe then the following year, I got in the BBC Writers Academy, and it was very much a full-time job then, so, there were certain landmarks along the way I guess. But I don't remember there being one definitive, clear moment where I thought, yes, I'm a writer. And when I speak to writers now, I do a lot of mentoring and stuff like that now. And I always say to people, once

you've finished a piece of work, then you're a writer. Because the amount of people you meet who talk about being a writer, and they've got ideas and they're good at pitching stuff to you, but they never actually can park themselves at a desk and put anything down. So, I think if you can do that, and that's one of the bits of advice I always give to writers as well, is make it easy for yourself. If you're writing something for TV, write something that's half an hour. If you want to write for a slot, don't write a feature film at 120 pages. Give yourself something you can finish a first draft, because in my book, once you've written a first draft, you can call yourself a writer. Whether anybody reads it, buys it, does anything, you're a writer in my book.

PC And there's that slightly addictive moment at the end of saying writing something, where you think, oh my God, I did that.

BT Yeah.

PC Even at my stage, having written many, many things, there still is that moment when you come to the end, even if it's just that big first draft of going, I did that, and that's addictive.

BT A mate of mine used to always say, there's only three points in this process where it's pleasurable, certainly professionally. One is when you get the gig, the second point is when you finish the first draft. After that it's just notes and pain and changes and editing and stuff. And then the third one is when you get paid. Yeah, and that's it. The rest of it is just quite painful and you question your sanity at every point.

PW Talking about that and difficulties. How do you cope with knockbacks when they came and then the successes?

BT I think I'm reasonably resilient and a funny kind of way, the knockbacks get harder as you're trying to get your career up to the next level. At the start, you just got so used to them. And there is a real, whatever you're doing around writing, you're always being told. We all accept that the knockbacks are part of it. So, whenever you come in that world, when you meet more experienced writers, the first thing they warn you about is that and I do think I am quite a resilient person, I grew up kind of needing to be resilient in lots of ways and quite determined and all that. I think deep down I always felt like I could do it. I'd had jobs before when I'd worked in sales environments and I suppose that maybe trained you for it a little bit as well. There was always a lot of disappointment in that, and I wasn't brilliant at those jobs, but it did kind of toughen you up a bit. So, I think I learned quite quickly not to take it too personally. I think there's a weird thing in this business, in this profession where the skills you need are actually diametrically opposed to each other. You need to have a sensitivity and all that and an awareness of what's around you and you need to care, and you need to be passionate and all that stuff, but at the same time, you also need to be brutally dispassionate about the fact that if somebody doesn't like your work, it doesn't mean it's terrible or you're no good or you'll never work again or anything like that. It's just subjective, and it's easy to say like this, but actually you do get very and going through particularly like working on the big shows, Coronation Street, these types of shows, you have not got time to be agonising over notes of somebody. You've got to be good at sort of fighting your corner to an extent in a diplomatic, professional way, but also, not being wounded by the fact that somebody disagrees with you on a point, it's different when it's, you see those shows, you've got to be really, really passionate. You've got to retain that passion. You've got to really care. And I loved working on that show in particular, to be honest, for a period of time anyway, when it's a story that's much more personal to you, then it is a little bit harder, but you've got to retain that same little bit of distance and it makes everyone's life a little bit easier if you do.

PC What about the successes? Because sometimes that can throw you off just as much as a knockback?

BT I think that's true, actually. Maybe not quite as much because successes are generally good, but I think you learn. One of the things I think I've learned down the years is not to get too carried away with anything that seems to be really good because it is that thing people talk about a lot as well, is don't get too high with your highs, you've got to try and keep yourself on some kind of level, which is easier said than done. And I think the one thing you don't want to do, you know, the truth of it is, for me, I've learned, there's a lot of really good writers out there and there can be a sense of entitlement. My voice needs to be heard, I deserve this, I deserve that. And it's just rubbish that at the end of the day, there's better writers than me that have never had a page produced because maybe they weren't quite as resilient or determined or lucky or whatever. So, you know, if you have a bit of luck, by all means, yeah, enjoy it. But don't let yourself get too carried away. I think that's the Scottish in me.

PC Everything you've said so far is just the word resilient, absolutely comes through that if you don't get this way, you're going to find another way to get there. Or actually, you're just always going to move forward, whatever that moving forward process is. So, the next question we have lots of questions for you. You've worked between theatre, TV and radio, how easy was it to get the work in those different areas?

BT I found at the start, theatre was part of that process to coming into writing. Because the year before I moved down to Leeds, that seed being sown had already happened. I'd gone to Edinburgh Festival and there's a nice circle of that because I'm taking my show to the festival this year, which has always been an ambition of mine, but it was a show called *Decky Does a Bronco* by a Scottish writer called Douglas Maxwell and a company called Gridiron, who I think are still going now. And it was outside in a park and it was physical theatre and it wasn't raining in Edinburgh this particular, it doesn't always rain in Scotland. I shouldn't pander to that because actually it annoys me slightly that it does rain a bit more than it does down here. But we had a beautiful night watching that. I didn't grow up going to theatre very often, went a couple of times with school, but wasn't really a big theatre goer. That night was the first time I'd seen any live performance for a while and it captured me. So, when I started writing, I realised really quickly that they won't take a gamble on you unless you've got some experience and you get caught in that kind of loop of need the experience, but you can't get the job to get the experience. Whereas I realised very quickly, and I think that probably was the slight strategic, strategic sounds a very grand way of describing it, but just having a little bit of an idea of how to get around it, how to get to that next stage. And I just realised that I had a much better chance in theatre of getting something produced and actually, that I also could get the agency to make something myself without needing 10's, 100's, millions of pounds to do it. So, I really focused on theatre partly as a pragmatic, practical thing where I thought I've got a chance of getting something professionally produced. And around about that time they started the BBC Writers Academy. I think that was 2004. I was still at uni at that point. And one of the writers from Leeds, he's a friend, but was a mentor, he was one of the first intake on that and I'd set my sights on that, but you needed a professional production to apply for it. So, I thought, if I can get a professional thing, at least I can then apply for that. So, that became the focus for a little while, but it was not as a very long-winded answer to that question, but I don't think any of it was easy, but TV was impossible without the theatre.

PC But each genre, as I well know, has different demands on you as a writer. I mean, as a pure storyteller, you're always going to tell a good story, and I think that underlies everything. But there

are distinct genre differences, I think, between writing for TV, for radio, for theatre. Do you have a favourite? What do you think the differences are? And do you have a favourite?

BT It changes, really, and it depends. Right now, I went back towards theatre and again, it's been a little bit of a pragmatic thing, like *Better Days*, and I think we'll come back to that later. You know, I crowdfunded for that and raised the money and just made a show, which has been very, very hard work we'll come back to. But I think I did that because I'd been getting a little bit jaded with the TV process and just needed to write something that I really wanted to write and then just make it and see it on stage. Instead, I just needed that release rather than - I've been doing a lot of TV development the last few years where you spend a lot of time writing stuff that never sees the light of day, and it's a very narrow door to get through for that. There's a lot of writers just exist in this perpetual writing and notes and writing and notes, and you never actually see the fruits of your labour. And I knew, I suppose it is just like going back to what worked in the first place, to just get something on stage. But there's no better thrill than sitting there and knowing that millions of people are enjoying it. And the privilege of writing on again, *Coronation Street* was the one I did most of and, that thing where characters that people have known and loved for decades and you get to put the words in their mouth is a real privilege and it's a real thrill. And I miss that in a lot of ways, I really do. So, yeah, it varies. And radio is great because you can just do anything. I'm about to start writing a new radio play as well, actually. And there's no boundaries. Yeah, it's great.

PC A swishy sounds. You got the sails flapping, you're at sea, it's just, you can be in outer space, you can do whatever you like. And the sound engineers are just brilliant.

BT I've only done one Radio 4 play produced, which was about the Nigerian scrabble team a few years ago. And it was great because as a writer, you're involved in the whole process. You get invited into the studio, record it, you interact with the actors, and I enjoy that part of it as well, it's great. I remember a guy called when I was at uni, who ran the radio drama stuff and who encouraged me to apply for the Alfred Bradley's, a guy called Dave Sheasby, who has passed away a few years ago now. But I remember him saying to me is the beauty of doing writing is that you get to write the biggest budget film you could never make because you can go anywhere.

PC It's all very different.

PW What are the differences between writing solo and writing as part of team? So, like on *Coronation Street* or *EastEnders*, there were always a group of writers in the writer's room.

BT That was one of the things I loved and that I miss a little bit about *Corrie*, to be honest, because you had the rhythm in your life. You would meet up for story conferences every few weeks and I always really enjoyed that. I learned so much in that show, some really talented writers in there, a lot of whom have become friends of mine still. And I think there's merits to both. Sometimes it is nice just to be able to do your own thing and all that, but it's also good. I've done a lot of writer's rooms, developing shows, some that have been made, some that haven't, comedy and drama. I worked on an American show which has never been made yet, but hopefully will during the pandemic, actually. So, I think I would always want to have a bit of both. I do enjoy writer's room. I think I work quite well in writer's rooms. And you get better at articulating your thoughts and your ideas in a more pithy way. And there's pros and cons to both, I would say.

PW Let's talk about *Better Days* now because we mentioned it earlier, but this is your return to theatre. Tell us about what inspired the story and how you got it staged with the crowdfunding?

BT I mean, it was inspired by my youth, really. Not entirely my youth, but that period I was big into clubbing and what a lot of people think of as a rave scene. It was more clubs for me. I kind of came a little bit after the big raves for me, it was really '91, '92, '93 was my peak of it when I was quite young, 17,18. But I've always had the reverence for that time and I knew that there was, a lot of people like me who would love to see an authentic story told about that time. And I was at a point, as I said earlier, where I was just really looking to get some work done without having to go through the rigmaroles of years of development. Even in theatre, it can take years, especially, and coming off the back of the pandemic as well, there's big backlogs of shows. So, I wrote the script and then I just was just doing it, you know. I thought I'll try crowdfunding and I raised the money, the initial money. And then I went to a couple of theatre buildings and companies, and they read the script and said, we'll do it. We want this. Because the script really grabbed people, everybody that read it, I knew I had something that was quite special, to be honest, because everyone that read it, even like Leeds Playhouse, my local theatre, were like we'd love to do it, but it won't see the stage for two years. And I'd already raised money through social media to fund at least part the production and just decided to go for it at that point and just put the thing on. And I'd made that promise as part of the crowdfunder that it would be a show. So, I had to deliver, put myself under a lot of pressure, actually, to be fair. Stupidly, I think now at the time, but I delivered it, promised dates in seven different cities just crazy, really. But we did it. I, did it. But it was a great process and we're going up to Edinburgh with that show now. I was going to do a big tour this autumn and just had to have a reality check and just think, wait a minute here. As much as the response to the show was unbelievable, critically, audience sold out 6 of the 10 gigs and people were clamouring for more of it and all that. And I really was excited about going on the road with it again. But it's so hard to get good people to produce and stage manage and all that kind of stuff, and I need to be writing and all that stuff. Got a backlog of writing to get on with. So, we're calling it, we're doing Edinburgh and then we'll see. I'm hoping somebody might pick up. The actor who I'm working with in *Better Days* is just, he's phenomenal. He's a really, really talented young guy, so, I'm hoping somebody can maybe take it on.

PC And a good story never dies.

BT No, not at all. I mean, funny enough, I am working on a bigger vehicle again, that whole pragmatism, practical thing, I wanted to write it as a one-person show, actually, it really worked that way. It really worked well. So, it wasn't just a resources, practical thing but I am working on a scaled-up version of that and then I've been talking to people about a screen version and things like that as well. So, I think it's the start of something and Edinburgh is just the next stage of hopefully something that will be a longer life.

PC Good, because so much lovely work is done small, because we worry about these things. I mean, but look at Phoebe Waller-Bridge. She started small and so, yeah, I'm always hopeful and like I said, a good story never dies.

BT Absolutely. And that is -

PC It always finds its way somewhere.

BT - that is the whole I mean, listen, things are unexpected hits in Edinburgh, but I think you don't want to. Going back to the point of view with radio, different things work in different ways. On radio, there's an impossibly huge scale of what you can do, when you're actually taking a show on the road and touring it, you have to be practical, and you have to be pragmatic. As it happened, I went to see a show which I won't name, last week, and, there was like 11 characters on the stage and you didn't really get a sense of any depth for any of them, I didn't feel and people seemed to be fine with that and enjoyed that, but I like a bit more depth. And the beauty of having one person on stage is, if you get it right, it's a very connective, engaging experience. And it was in *Better Days*, and I was in that audience most nights and was looking around and, when people are really in it and you can tell -

PC You can hear it, that moment.

BT - you can feel it. You can feel the way they laugh, the way they respond. Even those moments when the music. all the house music tracks come in and even though people are talking, it's because they're excited and it's taking them back to a time that's really special to them. So, I think there's merits to doing stuff small scale, and my favourite theatre is probably smaller scale anyway, to be honest.

PC Complete aside but when I go to the theatre, the first thing I do is count how large a cast is.

BT Same.

PC Look at how many sets there are. I look around at the tech setup and think, oh, my God, look at how many lights we could, and I just get that kind of envy, you know. And it's yeah, it's ridiculous because there's something about theatre on all different scales that has its own particular magic.

BT Once you've made a show, though, your brain gets locked into this practical thing, , it has to be really good theatre to take you out of that, actually. And you know something's good when you stop thinking about all that stuff and you start to really engage -

PC And you trust it.

BT – yeah, yeah, yeah.

PC Do you ever have the panic moment when you see an actor forget a line or something and you absolutely just.

BT Oh, I hate it.

PC Yeah, I know.

BT I hate it. It's a weird thing.

PC And nobody else around you is realising, but you know that that actor is drowning or a cue has been missed and you go, oh, yeah.

BT I went to see that particular production with Leanne Rowley, who co-directed *Better Days* with me, and we came out at the interval and we were talking about the number of cast members, saying that's a lot of Travelodges to be booking on a tour. And the two of us just started laughing. You've got that practical thing in your head.

PC Yeah, producing is a whole, whole world.

BT Do you know something, it's been really good for me because I'd never produced a tour, and I've had various people come in who were meant to help, and some of them have and some haven't. And I've ended up having to do a lot more of it. And I could see that coming down the line with the autumn this year and I just had loads of dates booked and stuff and I just had to say actually, wait a minute, enough is enough, you know?

PW It's a hard slog, do you think?

BT Oh, yeah, I mean, it's interesting because writers are producers in American TV, but you're producers in a sense of you're producing the work and you're responsible for the script and you're on set to be the show runner's eyes and ears. And I've never actually done that but came very close to doing that side of it. And on TV shows, I the casting bit of it, the creative side of it, but the logistics of a tour and the technical stuff and all that is not my thing. I've learned, I managed it and we are managing it, but I don't want to be managing it forever.

PC But well done.

BT Yeah.

PW Can I just ask something about being at the Edinburgh Fringe and being Scottish?

BT When I came down to Leeds to start writing, once I'd worked out I was going to be a script writer, which happened during the course of the degree, I'd had a few bucket list things that I wanted to do. One was to get a show on at Leeds Playhouse, even though they didn't end up producing it, they did receive it a couple of nights in the studio there. So, that was one of those things I'd always wanted to do. I'd always wanted to write something that's on TV and I'd always wanted to have a show at the Edinburgh Festival. And then when *Better Days* was so successful in the spring, I thought, this is a show I'm going to, even if I have to fund it myself, which I am doing, I'm going to take it up there. And I was going to take it up for a week. And then everyone said, if you're going to have a chance of being a big success, you've got to be there the full thing. So, we're doing the full thing and going up there for three weeks.

PC You see? Resilient.

PW Excellent yeah, and congratulations.

BT Daft is another way of putting it.

PW No, I think it's great. I think it's great.

PC Now, the National Theatre of Scotland commissioned your play, *Black Star Band*. Now, what stage are you at with the process of that one?

BT Interestingly, I'm just very close to that first draft completion stage. I was sitting writing it on the train on the way down, actually. National Theatre of Scotland gave a little bit of workshop time last year, where we had Felix Cross, who's the director, who's attached to I know you guys know. And we had a few Scottish actors went up there, had a week up in Glasgow, which was great, which was brilliant. And I've been talking about this play and talking to Felix about this play since I think I first met him in about 2000, around the same time as I first met you, actually Pat. Perhaps about 15 years ago. So, it's been in the works for a while. But I'm on page 83 of a first draft just now, which is going to be about another 10 pages, I think.

PC Perfect. Basically, you're looking at a 90 minute or going up?

BT I think, because there's a lot of music in it -

PC A lot of music, yeah.

BT – it's got a lot of music in it. I think it'll be a big, to go back to this point about practical and all the rest, but I just knew I couldn't write this as a small show, this is one of those, if they're going to do it, they're going to have to do it. So, it's not huge, five characters, but it'll be a two hour plus play with an interval. Yeah.

PC Have I picked up on the right thing with Black Star, as in the Black Star in the Ghanaian flag?

BT Yes. It's inspired by it bears very little resemblance to any reality of anything that actually happened. But my uncle, a family friend uncle, not a blood uncle, in Glasgow, set up Scotland's first ever steel band. But the irony of it was he ran an organisation called the Ghana Welfare Society of Scotland, which was a very grandly titled social club really, where a few times a year, not just Ghanaians, but Africans generally, and Scottish people would get together and it was Ghanaian music, Ghanaian food, and it was a social thing. And then in the 1990 City of Culture Year in Glasgow, somebody decided they wanted a steel band. And the only collective of black people they could find weren't Caribbean, they were African but that didn't matter. They funded and they called it a Black Star Band, and the band still runs now.

PC There was something that happened then, because when we were working in Berwick-upon-Tweed, they had given out steel bands to just social groups in the area. Need reference from Pat as I can't make out the bold.

BT When was that, then?

PC I think it probably happened in the 90's, I don't know. We were up there in the 2015's around then. But it was something that seemed to be this was the most effective way of teaching music, because it was percussive, and so, there were huge donations of sets of pans all over the place. So, I don't know if that's what they benefited from.

BT I think they were the first, because it was 1990, and was the Black Star Band and it was Glasgow, City of Culture Year. I think they were the pioneers of it that might have been, but they were certainly the first Scottish steel band in 1990.

PC And once again, we have music as well as theatre.

BT Yeah, yeah, and for me, music is a big part of my life and I've had to take that story. It's in no way a literal representation of anything that happened. It's a nod to my uncle, who's now back in Ghana, who set the band up. But the story is very different, and I've had to create a little bit of drama in there where, I think it was a little bit of time when they did come down to Yorkshire to get their pans because they had to come to Leeds. Funnily enough, another Yorkshire connection there. And I think people did raise an eyebrow about what this bunch of Scottish Africans were doing starting a steel band up, and I've kind of just played with that.

PC I love that, yeah.

BT But everyone who hears that story is like, well, that's a bit different.

PW Now we're going to talk about comedy. Writing for comedy is hard. Can you tell us about writing for *In the Long Run*? And could you contrast that with writing for *Stan Lee's Lucky Man*, which is a supernatural crime drama?

BT The Long Run was my only TV credit on what would be classed as a pure comedy. And it was a very different experience. We did a writer's room for that, and obviously, it was like there was some big, big-name talent involved in it as well. And the process of writing comedy is so different because ultimately what gets made in the end, a lot of it is down to, the performers are writers themselves and they're comedic writers. So, you're just establishing a story and writing what you think are a few funny lines and then they essentially go and do what they want to do with it anyway. Whereas in drama there's a bit of that with actors, but in comedy, it's very much like that. I met a guy who edits the show *What We Do in the Shadows*, the BBC comedy, and he was talking about the editing process and how they work with that, and it's very cast driven. And for me, that whole thing about writing gags on demand, trying to be funny on demand in that way is just not my thing, really. I think everything I've written dramatically; I always like to have what attempts at humour. Usually it lands, sometimes it doesn't, but it's a really different process, just writing a funny line for a character because it comes in your head in the moment than actually thinking, I need seven gags on a page here. I didn't particularly take to that, to be honest. It felt very unnatural to me, a wee bit forced. And it was a great process, you know. Like it was Idris Elba's company that were doing it and it was great to work with and all that, and we got there and all the rest of it, but I would never put myself up as a pure comedy writer. You know, *Stan Lee's Lucky Man*, it was a traditional TV process where you do the kind of mini room that the American writers are striking against over there.

PC Can I just stop for a moment and just say Stan Lee? I mean, that blew my head away. You've written for a Stan Lee project. Okay, you can go back now.

BT It was one of those moments where you do think, wow, he'd obviously created that show with *Carnival for Sky*, and that was the show at that point. I was doing *Jamie Johnson* at that point as well, and then I got offered that and it was my first what you'd call, prime time, not a soap commission, to go on a show that had been greenlit. And at that point, I always said I would try and do three years on *Corrie* and then go and do some other stuff, and it just came at that point. So, that was the catalyst for me to think I'm going to try and break out. And that was 2017, and then I did it *In The Long Run*, the following year, so, I moved in a slightly different space.

PW I really enjoyed *Lucky Man*. I thought it was such an unusual very much grounded in reality, but also, it's supernatural, but you just accept it as you're going along.

BT I think those kind of genre shows for me, I'm not a massive sort of Marvel DC kind of guy, really, but that kind of grounded. And it's funny because I'm developing a TV project of my own. I'm writing on spec just now, which is probably not a million miles from that, where it's set in Leeds, and it's very much down earth grounded, but there's a little bit of a supernatural, magical kind of quality to it. And I love shows like the *Fades* was a brilliant show and UK show, that kind of stuff that feels like, *Humans* on Channel Four was the same, sci-fi, that kind of thing.

PW Yeah, I love that. Yeah. That's great.

PC Just listening to you talk, it's really interesting that there seems to be a distinction between creating a world and its consistencies, and then the characters within that world, and then the event for the characters within that world. It's almost as if and then beyond the event, of course, is a dialogue. It's

almost as if, for example, *Lucky Man*, that whole world must be, you must learn a whole world before you can begin to write for it.

BT Yeah, there's a rule set for these shows. They talk about the initial, what the rules of the world are, and what has got to be grounded and real and where you are allowed, there's got to be a logic to that. And the shows that don't work is when you see people just get themselves into a hole and then just creating some new thing. I think you've got to create that logic. And obviously that had already been established on *Stan Lee's Lucky Man* before I came on board, I think it was the second or third season. Third season, I wrote one of that. So, yeah, I think you need to have a concept, a rule set, and then the characters and all that need to exist within that and make sense within that, if you know what I mean.

PC Yeah, it's a lot.

BT Yeah, it is a lot, yeah. It's definitely a lot. It's not easy. TV writing is never easy, It's a pretty brutal, punishing process.

PC It is.

BT All of the time. And I don't think we always do it in a particularly logical way but again, you have to just develop that resilience because it can go on. I've been developing, adapting a book just now that I absolutely love, and it's a passion project. You're going back to what we talked about at the start. You know, it's something that I'm so invested in that, I'm having to keep a very objective, professional thing until you're making the right compromises, even though it needs to be. And I think there is a sweet spot in there where you get both of those things. But TV development and even writing for shows that are through the development stage and have been greenlit and are getting made. It's tough. It is tough, really tough and it's not for everyone. A lot of brilliant writers just can't do it, don't want to do it and I totally get that.

PC Yes, I'm one of those.

BT There are lots, there are lots who -

PC I did a TV writing training course and the one thing I sort of know is, oh, my God, this is rough.

BT – yeah.

PC It is tough.

BT It's really tough. And what tends to happen is, I think, the next bright young thing from theatre who's got this sort of original voice and talent and stuff like that, they get scooped up by the broadcasters and they go through the sort of the machine of trying to make television. And probably 90% of them are like, I'd rather be poor and be a playwright than subject myself to this craziness.

PC That has happened. Okay, we're going to go much wider now. This podcast is about black writers. Do you describe yourself as a black writer? Does that mean anything particularly to you?

BT It's a really interesting question because, I think if you're not white, then you're black, really, into all intents and purposes. So, I'm very hyper aware of that. But I think my career, as much as I've had a degree of success, I think it's maybe suffered a little bit from the fact that I started community TV, where there was a more openness to more diverse voices and a recognition, in terms of writers and stuff. But actually, what they were wanting was the black urban experience, and that's not me. I grew

up in relatively, it's a city now, but it was a town then, and it's still a town in my eyes. And, you know, Scottish working-class background became more of a middle-class life as I went on. And a lot of my writing is that, I do, I always try to have a, I feel like a duty, in a way, to have a broader representation of characters within my work. But for me, the first full length TV script I ever wrote, the protagonist was a 62-year-old white woman from Dundee. You know what I mean? So, I never feel 100% comfortable with that description of myself. I would never want to put myself in that box as being a black writer because I don't think of myself as a black or a white anything, really. You know what I mean? When you're mixed race and you grew up in a very white world as well, you never quite fit in anywhere anyway, you know what I mean? So, for me, I've found myself, people who grew up down here in London or even in big cities and multicultural cities, Manchester, Birmingham, their lived experience is a million miles from mine. So, I don't feel a closer alignment to them just because they happen to have a closer shade of skin to me. Because actually my experience is very different from theirs, and in some ways it's also similar there's a lot of crossovers. So, I would never reject that. I've got no real problem with that as a label, but it's not something that I would want to make that big a thing about either, you know, if that makes sense. I don't know if that does make sense.

PC Yeah.

PW Absolutely.

PC Right. I'm going to ask you to do some horizon scanning now. Generally, what do you see the challenges facing writers at the minute? And I'm not just talking about AI, although that's quite interesting, the strikes. What do you think the challenges are that writers are facing?

BT I think it's different in the different media that we've talked about. I think theatre, there's no money in it, very hard to make a living in it. If you don't come from money, you can't exist in that world and have a, I think people don't understand how poorly paid it is, you know. If you're a prolific theatre writer and you could write two or three stage plays a year and find a home for them and all of that stuff, even then you'd be earning a below average income, you're meant to love it and do it for the love and all the rest. But once you've got kids and mortgages and all that kind of stuff, that goes out the window. So, I think it's tough and I think you've still got the same gatekeepers and still with the same, I think it's probably better now, you know, than it has been. Speaking to my , not contemporaries, the people who came before me, I know that they had to break through a lot of doors to even get us on where we are now. So, theatre is that, I think with TV, it's just that every story is always going to be filtered through the prism of the same gatekeepers and you're never going to get a purity of story there. One or two people have managed to get close to that and I really respect them for doing it because I know how hard it is. And right now, there's been a contraction even in TV where you can actually make a good living. There's been a contraction in TV and there are less opportunities out there and it's that old resilience word as well, I think you need to be more resilient than ever at the minute. I've been finding it really tough, actually, to be honest, and I'm somebody who would be perceived as being relatively successful, but it's not easy, you know. It's not easy.

PW And do you think that's because of the pandemic? Since the Pandemic or?

BT I think that's part of it. I think there's been a general economic slowdown off the back of that. I think without getting into - we've not got time to go into the politics of that here. I think this country is becoming a more the world is as well. And I think that's what this is American strikes about, is there's a whole host of things. The pandemic is part of it I think the general economic contractions part of it. I think there's some, I don't want to sound too doom and gloom because actually, there is

some really exciting stuff going on, but it's never an easy time to be a writer. But it's definitely not any easier now, that's for sure.

PC I do sometimes think that the democratisation of creativity through digital has meant that more people can create stuff and disseminate it. What they probably can't do, as you say, is get past gatekeepers to mainstream platforms, I think. But it does feel to me that there is change. I was listening to a lot of people talk about AI, but it does seem to be AI is a regurgitation of what has already been done, and what artists can do is the next thing. So, there might be some confidence that there's space. Mediocrity may be overwhelmed by AI, but I think where there is genuine creativity, I hope, I hope it won't be overwhelmed.

BT I think that's a really interesting phrase, actually, mediocrity may be overwhelmed by AI. I think that's a really interesting way of putting that. The simple fact of the matter is people who have fought against a march of technological revolution in the past have never fared well. They've never won. You know what I mean, at the end of the day, it's coming down the track. There's money to be made from it. It's going to happen. And what the American writers and I'm a member of the guild over there, what the American writers are fighting for right now is some kind of protection against it so that even, not just the mediocrity, but, you know, there'll be some kind of protection from it. And to your point as well, I think the challenge is, and I'm at a point now where I've realised that I don't want to be producing my own work and touring shows, but the next thing I want to do is to just make something for the screen without going through that process, like I did for *Better Days*. The challenge with that is that, it needs a lot of money because you're going to, regardless of, people don't look at and think, oh, well, he's done that on a shoestring, and they make allowances for it. People will consider it on its artistic merit and that alone, and that's as it should be. But it means you can only undertake something like that if you can get a certain, A, if you can write something so good and get performances so good that even if there's a slight deficiency in the quality of what you're, and you can see that it's not big budget. If there's an authenticity and a truth and an integrity to that, and it's got enough quality, you can just about do it. But then you've got to go through that thing of raising money and it's horrible having to go to people and try and get their time for less than you'd like to pay them if you had the money. And that in itself is just a really energy sapping process, but I'll probably try it at some point.

PC Yeah. I think the only thing that has been consistent in most successful writer's careers, I think, from all the conversations we've had, is the ability to see a possibility in something and to have the courage to move to it. So, yeah, you'll be producing something that you've written for television very shortly.

BT Well, I'm hoping that I'll have something soon. One of the projects I'm working on now, we're at a more advanced stage of that than I've ever been, but you can get the rug pulled out from under you at any point, so, hopefully that'll be another step towards that. But beyond that, I really do want it, whether it's going to make even a short, but there's not as much value in short films for writers as there perhaps is a feature. I've got an idea for that kind of stuff and I'm just trying to work out I think finding the right producer for that would be good. And yeah, a bigger stage version of *Better Days*, which again, I wouldn't try and produce myself. But I think I've got a good foundation to try and sell that. So, these are all things that I'd like to do. But for the next wee while, I think after we get Edinburgh done and delivered out, I want to spend a bit of time just writing, that would be nice.

PC Yes. The balance between working hard and staying healthy is something that, again, more and more people are beginning to appreciate.

BT Definitely. You can run yourself in the ground quite easily.

PC Yeah, definitely.

PW So, now we have come to our final question, which is, what are the best things about being Ben Tagoe?

BT I struggle with questions like this, I suppose most people probably do, but I think even though it can be exhausting trying to get to the, because you're always chasing something next level, but having something in your life. What I was looking for, what I realised I was looking for when I first started writing. You have to look back sometimes and allow yourself a little bit of a pat in the back or whatever and actually, have a career doing something that I love so much and that still generates excitement, ambition in me, is something that I really appreciate. I really do and it can be difficult when you're sort of in the midst of it and you're bogged down in it and it's tough and it's kind of, why am I doing this? And all that. But actually, I feel like I've achieved a lot of things that I set out to do, and this year in particular, I've been busy ticking things off the list that had been on my brain, so, that's great. And yeah, and being a dad is great as well, actually. That's probably the most important thing. My son's over in Zante on a lad's holiday just now, so, I'm pestering him everyday. Did you go home last night? Are you okay? All that stuff but he's great. He's brilliant. So, being a dad is also great.

PW Ben, thank you very much for being part of The Amplify Project.

BT No problem. No problem. Thank you for having me.

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