



This is a transcript of the conversation between hosts Patricia Cumper and Inua Ellams.

**Patricia Cumper** Inua Ellams was born in Nigeria in 1984. He's a poet and playwright whose work has toured nationally and internationally. He's also a screenwriter, graphic artist and designer. His poetry pamphlets and collections include *Candy Coated Unicorns and Converse All Stars* and *The Actual*. His theatre plays have been commissioned by, amongst others, the National Theatre, Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company, and his audio plays by the BBC. Inua's first play, *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, was awarded an Edinburgh Fringe First at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2009. His 2017 play, *Barbershop Chronicles*, sold out two runs at the National Theatre and transferred to the American Repertory Theatre in Massachusetts. In 2020, Inua debuted his popular live stage show, *An Evening with an Immigrant*, with anecdotes of his childhood and his experiences as a refugee. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and was made an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the Arts, London. He was awarded an MBE in the 2023 Birthday Honours List for services to the arts. Inua Ellams, welcome to The Amplify Project.

**Inua Ellams** Thanks for having me.

**PC** When did you first become aware of words and stories?

**IE** Before I answer that question, one of the reasons why I said yes to this podcast is because there used to be a beautiful music night called Amplified back in the day around Oxford Circus, Oxford Street so there's lots of nostalgia for me around the word Amplified, not just in a music sense but also in a physical sense and what it is then to platform other writers and artists, which is key to my practice as a curator. In response to your question, probably when I was a kid, way back when my parents brought back Enid Blyton novels to Nigeria and I was reading them and just lapping up literature voraciously, maybe as a precursor to them was my mother reading the Bible to us, reading biblical stories. So yeah, I think around that time is when words came into my life. My mother was a huge champion of education. She worked as a secretary in the Ministry of Education in Nigeria, so it was just key to the lifeblood in our family.

**PC** You've had an interesting school life as well. I think quite international, if that's not a quiet way of saying it. Could you tell us a bit about that? Where do you think that had an influence on the artist that you've become?

**IE** Yeah, in Nigeria, in the north where I was born, I went to a primary school there and then when we moved to Lagos, I attended Corona Apapa, where Corona have a string of schools around the country, but it was where upper middle-class kids went to. So, I had an inkling of the world outside of Nigeria even though I was just in Nigeria. And because I read books by British authors, I had a sense of what was out there. And then I went to Nigeria on boarding school for three years, Federal Government College, Odogbolu, 10 or 9 I started there, and then when I was 12 years old, we left and moved to England and I went to Holland Park School in West London, which was so well renowned that Nelson Mandela visited pretty much the week before I started. And I remember trying to track down one of the kids whose hand he shook and shook it very ferociously trying to, by

osmosis, retract or absorb some of his greatness. And after three years there, I moved to Dublin, to Ireland, then I went to Firhouse Community College on the outskirts of the city. And then after three years there, I moved to London and that was where my formal education ended. I spent time sneaking into universities of Goldsmiths and University of the Arts London. So, I had this international community of students around me, even though I wasn't a student, I was just stealing knowledge. I sort of lived and studied in all of those places and learned formally and informally.

**PC** Why did you have to move from place to place? And I get the sense from what I've read that there's a very strong mischievous child (chuckles) who adapted to all of these situations.

**IE** Yeah. We moved because initially it was my father's work. It took us across Nigeria. But my father had married my mother, obviously, she was a Christian, he was a Muslim and in the North, that was already a bone of contention with the mostly Muslim community in which we lived. And when he returned from Mecca after completing Hajj, he was questioning his faith and that didn't go down in that community, it didn't go down well. So because of that, we fled from the North to the South and some of that violence followed us. So we had to flee the country because of religious persecution and that's how we ended up in the UK. And the immigration difficulties we arrived into weren't cleared up after three years. The Home Office wanted us to return to Nigeria, which we couldn't, so our lawyers advised us to go to Dublin. And after three years, we were threatened to leave the country by, they called themselves Sinn Féin, I don't know if they were, but they were following us home and sending my father precise descriptions of the clothes we were wearing as kids and because of that, we left and came back to London. So that's it, religious persecution, secular and political persecution from governments, pretty much in all three countries in one way, shape or form. So that's why we left. And I think my parents did a great job of protecting us from the true quality of the threat, which meant that as kids, we could play as much as we could. And I say that because by the time I was 18, I had left three different countries, three different ways of life, three different ways of trying to belong to a community. So, I'd loved and lost a lot at the time, which meant that my childhood in many ways ended, and I became an adult instantly. And what that meant was when I was around kids my age, I couldn't take them seriously because they hadn't experienced what I had. Their stakes were low for them, whereas for me, it had been life or death for such a long period of time. So, the only way I could balance all of that was instantly trying to create. You know, my sisters and I, I'm the only boy in my family, we created this bubble where we could be with each other and invent. I got interviewed, I was asked if I could save a book, which would I save, and I chose the Argos catalogue and explained that when I was a kid in Nigeria, my father brought these back. Well, because he couldn't afford the toys he really wanted to buy us, he would show us his intentions. So, my sisters and I would construct these incredible stories from the pictures of toys we didn't have. And that is the playfulness, the imagination that imbibed our family with the belief in the impossible, to see beyond your reality. And I think I was the only one who ran with that. Partially because I couldn't go to university, all I could do was sit at home with these words and pictures in my head and I became a writer. So yeah, that's how the circulus way in which I ended up doing what I do now.

**PW** Let's talk about your poetry now. You started out as a performance poet, and you seem to draw from everything from the romantic poets to hip-hop and folk tales. How did you arrive at your particular style? Would you say that you're eclectic?

**IE** I'm definitely eclectic. I think if you've lived the life that I have, you can't really hold on to fixed things. The world constantly throws itself at you and if you don't become porous, if you don't become a sieve, it's going to run you over. I became eclectic by necessity, by survival really. But I

had great teachers the whole way through my career as a student, and because they threw such passion into their teaching, some of that rubbed up on me. I was a sponge just soaking in the enthusiasm. So, I loved the Romantics. I loved seeing the crazy things they were contending with at their time, that they were rebels against society in many ways and then became hallowed as these frontrunners were at the time, they were completely the antithesis of that. So, I think I loved the romance of the Romantics. I loved the passion with which they wrote the deep philosophy that underpinned a lot of their poems. I think, because of my background, I was an instantly philosophical kid wondering why do those people believe those things and why does it have such an effect on us? What do we believe in? How can these two different sets of belief exist in harmony within me but feel like they're contentious, external, outside of me? Where does my thoughts meet the real world? And the Romantics were always questioning that with deep sadness and joy and extremities of emotion. And I think from there, when I moved to Dublin, my English teacher there in Ireland was also a lover of the Romantics, but also on some level he was political, which meant that when he was teaching Seamus Heaney, he was teaching the political undertones of things that lay beneath the surface. And because of Ireland's religious difficulties, I understood it as a Nigerian because of my religious difficulties. So there was this understanding of our cultures, of our motivations. And the basketball team that I played with in Dublin were avid lovers of hip-hop and it was through their enthusiasm I was introduced to it. But because I was still going to class, learning about classic poetry, and still spending time with those guys outside of the classroom on the basketball court and learning about contemporary African American language uses and narrative uses, I was pairing both things together in my mind. And again, they just seemed, they complemented each other much like Christianity and Islam did when I was a kid. I instantly found the similarities as opposed to differences. That bridge-building impetus, I think, really informs how I create. And I think what I struggle to do as an older writer is recapture the bravery of my youth. I think the older you get; the world keeps swinging its baseball bats at you.

**PW** Yeah, and it's difficult to just really grasp what you used to be, and with that kind of sense of freedom that you had when you were younger.

**IE** Yeah, and joy and wonder.

**PC** And boldness, which is what's lovely.

**IE** Yeah. Yeah.

**PC** It's just yours and you take it, and you use it.

**IE** Yeah.

**PW** And how has your style evolved over time do you think? What are you exploring?

**IE** I think there's something Martin Luther King described about the nature of temptation, saying that imagine if you were stood on a beach and told, make any decision and choose any grain of sand, which would you choose? How would you even go about choosing one grain and saying, this is the most important one? And I think at some point, I realised that maybe I believed that I could write anything, or I could go in any direction. And that was terrifying. And because of that, I began to learn about form in poetry and structure, which gave me a funnel, a shape in which to pour my thoughts into. And I think my journey as a writer is to understand that, how to contain myself rather than just to splash out into the world. And I think that's where I am right now, trying to renegotiate my relationship with poetry, my fear of the possibility, with my intention to create what is possible

and to balance that. And I'm still on that journey back to poetry. I'm exercising most of my artist's intentions now in writing plays and writing screenplays, creating characters as conveyors of all the angst that I'm kind of turning through, creating characters who are poets who can just do the things that at the moment I'm still struggling with,

**PW** What does it take to write a collection of poems? For example, in *The Actual*.

**IE** Yeah

**PW** I found it really fierce and very intense, and there's an edge of anger in there.

**IE** Yeah

**PW** Is that what motivates you?

**IE** No. A lot of the time I'm motivated by play and discovery. The very first two books of poems, *Candy Coated Unicorns*, the *13 Fairy Negro Tales*, and *#Afterhours*, I'm motivated by wonder, by trying to find conversations with myself, with other writers outside of me who influenced my world, nonetheless. *The Actual* came about accidentally, after the American president at the time had made another homophobic, racist, misogynist, sexist, whatever comment, and I got angry, and I wrote a poem called F Donald Trump. And I read it at an event, and I got a great round of applause from the audience, which I thought, okay, I didn't think it was that good. And then a friend of mine who was sat in the audience actually challenged me to write 45 similar poems. And when I began the process, I realised I was bottling up a lot of things and then ended up writing 55 such poems. So *The Actual* was powered by anger, but the drive was to find a way to contain the anger. It's written without a single punctuation except the forward slash, which means that reading it creates this tumbling effect where you're falling into my thoughts or into the way the world meets my thoughts. And I used that single forward slash as, or everything punctuation does, as a full stop, as a comma, as a quotation mark, as a close quotation mark, et cetera. And the thing is, I was - half of those poems are written on my phone, if not all of them actually - hustling between meetings, running underground in tubes and trains, before I fall asleep, when I wake up in the morning, and I wanted the audience to get that sense of tumbling, of the world constantly throwing itself at you, and you're trying to find a way through the madness. And I think I still like that, the essence behind writing a book. So in the current book of poems that I'm working on, I'm trying to hold on to that whilst giving it a little bit more structure.

**PW** And for *The Actual*, you say you wrote it on your phone. So, was there a process where you're editing, you're just putting the first thoughts down, but you still go and you craft it and you edit it and really get the feeling that you want from it?

**IE** There was a process of that. And it was continuity, really. How do I keep driving whilst creating clauses within the speech? How do I put an arresting image here, but make sure it isn't an arrest? It's just part of the continuum of thought. It was more that than trying to find shapes on the page because all the poems are, essentially prose poems are laid out as that. There's an exercise to do where I remove the prose aesthetic of it and lay it out with line breaks, and then to see, think what else to do so the book would be, I don't know, three or four times its length in terms of thickness. But that was what the editing process was like, was creating breaths within the text.

**PC** What I enjoyed about it is that I would literally just look at the list of poems and choose a word that I liked and went and looked at that one. But the one that punched me in the chest was F Sunflowers. That one got me, I have to say.

**PW** Can I just go back and ask you about why did your friend challenge you to write 45? What was interesting about the number 45?

**IE** That was Donald Trump is the 45<sup>th</sup> president of America.

**PW** Okay, that's good to know.

**IE** So—oh, that was the bridge I forgot, because I thought the title F Donald Trump was too on the nose, I retitled the poem F 45. And as you said, why don't you write 45 poems? And then I wrote 55. (Laughs)

**PC** And I love the graphic as well.

**IE** Thank you. (Laughs)

**PW** Can I talk about #Afterhours because this is a book of poetry that I will stay on my shelf. It's not one that I will give to anybody but it's one that I will actually recommend, and I absolutely enjoyed it. Can you talk to us a little bit about this project of response poems and why you decided to put it together?

**IE** Yeah, I love #Afterhours. It was difficult to write this book. It's a book that if I didn't write it, I would want to exist. There's a saying, imitation is the highest form of flattery, and I think that was one of the starting points. From the book, there are all these great poets that I read who I loved, and I wanted to imitate their style whilst honouring their style. I think the great test of literature is when you find yourself in a text and you don't really need to change anything for you to think this is exactly about me, and all of the poems in the book I loved, I thought this is exactly about me, but I thought, how do I explain myself to others who don't understand why this means so much to me. And that was, that's the gesture to take these poems written by Irish and British poets, and really deconstruct them in depth then reconstruct them within my immigrant Nigerian hip-hop hood background and see what happens. It's an exercise in human generosity, you know, in bridge building, in cultural understanding, in postcolonial literature. It's fun. It was fun for me to do this. I read about four or five hundred books of poetry in the year that I was writing this, because I looked for books of poems that were published in the years that I was born between 1984 and 2000—when I turned 18, 2002 I think, and then I'd find one poem from each year which seemed to capture the most pivotal moments in my life in that year, and I'd reconstruct those poems within my background, and I wrote diary entries about the thought process of doing so. I learned so much about myself. I interviewed my parents ceaselessly, my sisters, what were you thinking when it was happening to me, and I wrote about them. So that's what it is. It's a diary entry, it's an anthology, it's a memoir, and it's also a new collection of poems.

**PC** Yeah, I absolutely loved it. I read where you said that your plays are failed poems. So how does a poet approach writing for the stage? Is there anything lost or gained by changing form?

**IE** I think what is lost is the closeness of reading. And by that, I mean, when you write a poem for the page, you can be as dense as you want because the reader can spend their time deconstructing it, picking it apart. And when you write a poem for the stage, for performance, you have to ensure the audience understand it, not just in one go but chronologically. You have to lead them down a

path from the attic in a house right through the front door. You can't go by all the circuitous routes as you might in a poem. So, you have to hold them. And that's the main difference between what is considered stage of performance poetry and page poetry, is understanding your audience, how the text meets them. And where this process meets the theatre is, you have light, you have sound, you have other ways of communicating. I remember when I was working on *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, I wrote this beautiful internal monologue about loss and confusion. And my director said, listen, Inua, as gorgeous as this text is, if you stand in that pool of light and look over your shoulder and look to the ground, you communicate all of that to the audience. And it was absolutely right. So, it's a negotiation. It's a collaboration with artists outside of your field, but who understand I want to figure out how to uphold and support your field. So, what is lost is your own universe. What is gained is the universe. It's everything outside of you.

**PC** Does that mean that your sense on the stage, your visual sense that you use in terms of your graphics and other things, was also engaged by working on stage with lights and directors and actors?

**IE** Yeah. My penultimate one-person show was called *Black T Shirt Collection*, and it was the first time where I got to illustrate bits of the story. So, the audience just saw pictures moving on stage. And I employed that when the action on stage leapt beyond language and needed visuals and needed to beam straight into the mind of the audience without text. So, for instance, I wanted to communicate what it means to leave a country. And I drew an airplane taking off, but the sound designer created such an auditory companion to that image that we shook the theatre. We got complaints from the main National Theatre, from the Olivier we went to Dorfman. And that's because she absolutely got what I wanted to communicate, the weight of leaving, you know? So, those are moments where we worked in collaboration with each other, where my graphic sense communicated what I needed, but she communicated the feeling of it as well.

**PC** I'm going to be a little more practical now. You've had plays at small venues like the Arcola, national institutions like the National Theatre. You had one that was on in the United States. What was that like? Was it different going from small venues? And how involved are you in these different spaces and transitions?

**IE** I think that definitely is, and it took me a while to really understand the meat of that. When you're creating a play for small venues, when you think you're in an intimate space, the stories you tell can be much more quaint. The performer can be much more precise, delicate, soft, intentional. The story can be more naked. And when you're creating for larger spaces, big bold statements, when you're talking to an audience at large, it's great for political discourse. It's great for big, big world changing, rocking things. You can do that also in small venues, but the skills are softer. And I think being aware of that lends the possibility for greater success to your text, to the audience, to everyone you collaborate with. But I try to be as involved in all new productions as much as possible. The play that just opened in New York was called *The Half-God of Rainfall*, which is a long epic poem that I wrote around 2019 was when it was completed, when it went up, and then the *Barbershop Chronicles* toured across the UK. I think if you're writing for an audience in the country, if you want the play to be a successful, you have to take into consideration what they know, what they don't know, what is understood, how words resonate there and how words resonate here, and the cultural history is attached to those words. And they differ, as much as we think we understand a lot of American culture, it's very different when you're there and vice versa here. So, a case in point, even in *An Evening with an Immigrant*, or *The 14<sup>th</sup> Tale*, there are certain words that I know do not carry the same cultural weight. There's some parts in the world where the most popular

toothpaste is McLeans. Therefore, if I mention that, it speaks to a broader cross-section of the audience, and if I were to mention Colgate, which may have, I don't know, socioeconomic resonances, you know. So being aware of these cultural signifiers means that you know who you're speaking with, you know, how to make sure the text lands with them stronger. So those are some of the nuances I look out for.

**PC** When reading *Barbershop Chronicles*, what I loved was the – even with just reading it, the way the characters pop off the stage from the rhythm of the language that they speak, and the rhythm of the language in the way that they interact with one another, it felt very deliberate, the length of sentences and the rhythm of that kind of thing.

Talk to us a little bit about how you work with multiple characters and multiple voices rather than a single poet's voice.

**IE** That probably comes from living in various countries and understanding profoundly people speak differently, understanding how class affects that as well, but also not relying on my own imagination and my own intellect because there's something deeply capitalist and colonial about that, which isn't how art was constructed in Nigeria before the British landed. I remember reading this book about poetry and they talked about how there's a gathering, a festival of poetry, and there was an American and a British and an African who wasn't given his own country, just an African. And the British were reading in this very old, Etonian, polished, Oxbridge accent. The Americans did something that sort of replicated that. But when it was time for the African, he comes on stage with a drum and he's playing it and singing along and has the whole audience laughing and eating out of his hands. And backstage, the American and the British man both admonish him for playing with drums and for entertaining the audience. And he explains to them that where he's from, no one cares that he's a poet. For him, he's just an entertainer and he has to earn the right to entertain because if he doesn't tell the story right, they will take it from him and tell it amongst themselves. Because they know the story already, his job is to find new ways to tell it, to make something new out of something old. I really admire that as a way of communion with an audience, that I'm telling you something you already know, my language is just a little bit fancier. When I was researching *Barbershop Chronicles*, I travelled to all of those countries and met all of the characters that I mentioned in my play. So, I didn't invent them because if I tried to, I'd have failed. The universe, the world is full of stories, so I just went there to capture it. And I had one editing rule, which is if the same topic comes up in three countries, then it has to go in the play. So that was one way of finding what unites us. And therefore, the differences was in how that is expressed. So, I recorded those conversations and I cleaned up for editing purposes where I tried to maintain the rhythms of speech, the particular slang terms, the way they'd construct and deconstruct sentences, because that is where identity really lies. That's where the truth of who we are is expressed.

**PC** And the urgency of people's situations that comes—that sings through the language as well. That you create drive and urgency in the way that they speak to one another.

**IE** Hmm. Yeah.

**PW** Can I ask which countries you went to for your research?

**IE** Yeah, I went to South Africa. I couldn't go into Zimbabwe because at the time, Mugabe didn't like British writers. So instead, I interviewed Zimbabwean clients and barbers in South Africa. So South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana, Kenya unfortunately didn't make it into the

play because we couldn't quite make the scene work in the larger narrative. But I still have it and one day I'm going to do something with it.

**PC** Oh, yeah. Nothing ever goes to waste.

**IE** No. (Laughs) No, no.

**PW** So you've led writing workshops all over the world. You're a very international person. What was that like and how did it vary from country to country?

**IE** A lot of that work was done with the British Council. So, I find myself in a country and in one of their libraries or council spaces, students would come to be taught about language. A lot of the times, there were better English speakers than I was (laughs) so it felt like preaching to the choir. So, what I teach them was how I express my Nigerianhood within the British Anglophone intellectual and artistic space. So that's what I did. So I would take poems that I like, deconstruct them much like I do in #Afterhours and explain how I thought the poems work, why they work for me. Then encourage them to write their own versions to deconstruct the poems and find parallels between what these American or Irish or Scottish or Canadian poets were talking about, or Nigerian poets, and what rang true for them and encourage them to create their own. So, it was a very simple thing, but it led to the deepest and most profound conversations. There's a poem called 'Litany' by Billy Collins, and this is a poem that I thought I knew inside out. I taught it a million times in schools and secondary universities right across the country. So, I walk into the British Council, this is in – I think it was in Pune, somewhere in that part of the world in Asia, and I walked in and there are 50 women in the workshop, and the three men who rocked up, came, saw them, and just left the room. (Laughs) So, it was just me teaching these women. So, I distributed the poems and they read it. There was this rich conversation about it. But I heard the wildest interpretation, which I can never shake now, and this lady said she thinks it's a poet comparing his mistress to his wife. And every time I read the poem, that's what I see now. And I don't know if that's the case for Billy Collins, this is an old poem, I've never met him, he's an American, incredible poet, but they just touched me, they taught me so much. And in that, they taught me about feminism in that part of the world, about what is accepted. And I know it's different in different parts of the world, I know in the Caribbean, sometimes a woman has kids by multiple men and it's just standard practice, and don't think of nuclear families in the way we do here. But in India, that was just mixed with the caste system and understanding a man's duty to provide for who he can, which is taught in Islam. So it wasn't about ownership, it was just about honesty. It was just a really fascinating conversation.

**PW** So you learned as much from those workshops as you were trying to teach?

**IE** I always try to, always have to. I remember (chuckles) the year after Gaddafi died, the British Council were looking for artists to go to Libya. And every writer they approached said, no, I'm never going there. No, it's horrible, you know? But I said, yes, I responded in 10 minutes, I said I'm going. (Laughs) I remember going there and it was a battlefield, pretty much. You walk through the markets, and they were selling guns and bullets like you'd sell fruit, just there, people testing out weapons, shooting them in the skies. And there was this young woman who came to my workshop saying she's part of this new frontier of writers and poets and novelists, and they want to publish their work, but the publishing houses only want work to be published in classic Arabic, which they didn't speak. She wanted to write, she wanted to publish as they wrote. And I said, well, you could just get a printer and publish your book. And she said, what do you mean? I said, just publish in an A4 folder and use staple pins. And then they got up and gave me this round of applause because it



never occurred to them that the tools with which to create a book are so rudimentary, they're just around you. That just speaks to what happens if you're locked in a mindset and you can't see a way out, where the freedom is right there in your backyard, in your bedroom, and you can't see it. So, I always think about that, indoctrination, the repercussions of that intergenerationally.

**PC** You described yourself on your website as a curator, and I'm really interested in what does that entail. Among your many activities, what curating do you do?

**IE** I host many literary events and extravaganzas and experiments. The first one was called the R.A.P Party, which started around 2010 where I commissioned poets to either create new work or just read poems after a certain theme, and after which the DJ plays two songs that reflect the themes. This was born out of frustration of page poets who loved looking down on hip-hop and spoken word poets, performance poets who loved looking down on page poets, and I'd read both of their works and think, you guys are doing the same thing. (chuckles) Let's not create division here. Let's just celebrate this. And I've been doing that since 2010, and there have been 62 RAP parties in total from Nigeria to Brazil, right across to UK, Germany, in New Zealand, Switzerland, I think. did I do one in Switzerland? And it's just a way of gathering disparate writers who think they're different and to show them how similar they are. So, I think that's the mischief in me thinking you're going to like that person, you don't think you will but I know you will. But I've also created other happenings, other literary happenings. One of them is called Poetry Film Hack, where I commissioned poets to write poems about a film. We screen the film and then they read the poems after. And again, these bridges, the divide between both art forms, but also how it really works is poems can sometimes be alienating when a writer's world or references within this poem are different to those of the reader. But if you're writing about the same film, about the same world, which the audience have just experienced, that when you put the layer of poetry over it, they understand the poet's mind, they understand the arithmetic of him, the genius of him, and it works, you know, and it's just so enriching for the audience, for the film lovers and for the poets as well to be really understood and I've been doing those since maybe 2019, '20? There've been 10—no, 11 poetry film hacks, and the next one is coming up in celebration of *Sister Act Two*, the classic movie with Lauryn Hill.

**PW** Fantastic. (chuckles)

**IE** My curatorial head is now gathered under an umbrella term called O5 Festival. O5 is the name of my limited company, and it's this way of gathering my various curatorial experiments under one banner. The next one is going to be in the final week of September, the Barbican, one event every night from Tuesday to Saturday.

**PC** Could you tell us a bit about The Midnight Run as well?

**IE** Yes. The Midnight Run was born from my practice as a poor poet, where sometimes I couldn't get to venues, I couldn't afford bus fare, I just walk from one place to another. What I do is on the journeys, sometimes I'd stop and write poetry about the locations which I found myself. And I go to venues where I'd read the poems, sometimes the one I'd written on the way there and explain a little bit about it. And then I had a poetry mailing list, and I emailed the people saying I'd make these journeys by myself but if you want to come, I can stop and explain how I write a poem, and that's how we started. Curiously enough, some people came. And it's this way of creating a village for one night to migrate through a city, where we stop at certain locations and create memories there with each other. And it began purely as a way of teaching or sharing poetry, but it expanded very quickly to include art forms, as long as it's actually teachable and the tools that you teach it are portable,

that's it. So, we've had, I don't know, Tai Chi instructors, mindful eating enthusiasts, Greek wrestling coaches, basketball coaches. In Italy there was a guy who made ukuleles out of cigar boxes and he just taught 30 of us how to do so, a political speech writer outside Buckingham Palace teaching us, gorilla gardeners planting flowers in the middle of roundabouts at 3:00 a.m. It's a containment for conversation. Sometimes living in cities necessitates very boring conversations, what do you do for a living? Where do you live? Whereas in *Midnight Run*, the questions are more why is purple your favourite colour and write a poem about that and share it with me in five minutes. Or make a play about pterodactyls outside a shopping centre because there's a picture of one posted to the mirror. You know, it's about creating a safe space for adults to play. That's what it is.

**PC** Right, we're going to get a little bit more serious now.

**IE** Okay.

**PC** What does it mean to be described as a black writer? Is that a description you accept or reject?

**IE** I reluctantly have come to accept it. And I say reluctantly because in the safety bubble that Nigeria was in my youth, I wasn't conscious of the colour of my skin, neither did I think it was important to me, or to my identity or to my sense of self. I just was... It wasn't until I came here that someone described me as black, and then someone described me as African, and I thought, oh, okay, what does that actually mean? Or what meaning do you say it with? What am I not understanding here? And then I tried not to put that at the forefront of my work, or just create stories about people who look like me, simply because that's what I was comfortable about writing with, not as any political statement, that was just writing about my family or my... you know? And then, it began to gain political resonances when I understood the racist world in which I suddenly found myself and then the need to do so, to constantly represent, because I was in positions of power and if I didn't represent, no one would. And then it gave me the sense of importance, which I don't really like because it's somehow hostile to what it is to be a poet, which is to be a witness, and to ask questions, and being a witness means being the quiet person in the back of the room, not being the one in the spotlight trying to make political statements. So, I've rejected as much as I can, but I try to... but the world is beating me down with this reality. My girlfriend is Jamaican and over the last two or three years, I think the frustration of this has finally broken through under her, and she's been trying to explain to me why I have to accept this because if I don't, I will go mad, because there are glass ceilings everywhere and I just believe they weren't there, and I kept on banging my head against it, you know? So, what it means to be a black writer, it is what it means for Icarus to lose his wings, is to fall to earth harshly, and to try not to drown.

**PC** For all of that, you've been remarkably successful. Just looking on from the outside, a kind of relentless creative drive that you express in images, in words, in events, in your writing, where do you think that drive comes from?

**IE** Partially, it's to do with being Nigerian. And I say that because there is something in the water in that country. There is an alchemy which exists within this landlocked boiling pot, which the country is. We were never meant to survive. Nigeria was designed to fail, to be a factory for the colonial establishment. There are 500 languages spoken. We're constantly bumping against each other. It was a land of nomads. We weren't supposed to survive, and creating a country created enough tensions that for years after independence, we erupted into a civil war. That was inevitable. And I think my Nigerianhood underpins my work ethic, because I think what I'm doing has to exist because Nigeria exists. I think what I'm doing must be done because this is a country where there's no social

safety net. People are out there living hand to mouth. So that sense really imbues my work. I started working as a poet when it was still illegal for me to work in this country. I had earned money by giving poetry performances in cafes, and I used that to pay the rent. So, I had to work to survive. Poetry wasn't... I didn't do this by choice. It was this or nothing. It was do this or starve. So, I became a writer out of necessity, and that hunger fuelled me so much to the point where it just became my nature. And I don't know how to stop. Again, my family keep asking me to rest, but I don't know what to do when I'm not working, and I'm trying to figure that out. But, it's why I create, and I want to put things out into the world. But also, there's so many people I've... so many communities that I represent, not because I looked for it, because I just am, I am an immigrant, I am an African, I am a black man, I am Muslim, I'm also Christian, I'm the clashes of all—and I'm also Irish, and all of those things. And there are lots of places where we don't speak, or we can't speak, or we don't have avenues to the bigger stages, and because I do, I feel like I have to, because with power comes responsibility. And as much as I'm reluctant to do so, I think, oh my god, I can write that wrong if I stand there and say this, therefore I have to otherwise it won't be done. And maybe that way leads madness, because I can't control anything, I'm still primarily a poet, the quiet person in the corner, witnessing the world, but I still feel like because I can and it needs to be done, I should.

**PC** Is there a self-care routine that goes with this? How do you tend that flame?

**IE** Um, I'm not very well. This year has been particularly difficult, and I'm trying to rest more. I'm trying to accept my mortality. I'm trying to accept that there are forces beyond me, and as much as they inspire my work, if I don't create room to rest, they will overwhelm me. I'm still on that journey.

**PC** Wow...

**IE** (Breathes heavily)

**PW** Don't worry, this is... Yeah, don't worry.

**PC** I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude.

**IE** No. It's okay. (Breathes heavily)

**PW** Do you want me to ask the next question?

**IE** Yeah, yeah.

**PC** Thinking about success and the way that other people put success upon you, so you were awarded an MBE this year for services to the arts, and you received an honorary doctorate from the University of the Arts London. What does it mean to you to be recognised in this way?

**IE** I think I appreciated the honorary award more than the MBE. I think because I used to sneak into that university, and it was illegal. It was against the rules for me to be there, but I just loved the community of students who found me and understood my predicament that because I was an immigrant who was classed as an overseas student, I couldn't afford uni, so they would do what they can to make me learn, to help to learn alongside them. So, I think, all of those years of sneaking around and making art that nobody would see, or writing poetry because I couldn't afford art materials, it was a celebration, a culmination of all of that stuff. I think that's why I really enjoyed making that speech to those graduating students when I picked up the honorary award at the start of the year. With regards to the MBE, there's a long form essay which I'm still building up to write.

But a couple of things. One is that a member of the public nominates you for this award that they think you deserve, and then that is recommended to Downing Street who then recommend you to the monarch, who happened to be Prince Charles. And I think when I understood that it was a civil award, or it was—it came from, it was sparked by civilians as opposed to the other way around, I thought, okay, this is probably someone who's come to my place and thinking, well, he works really hard, someone should put some respect on his name and thought this would do that. And the other reason why I accepted the award is because when I was fighting the Home Office for the 26 years long, it took me to do so, those who supported my case, who wrote letters of petition to the Home Office were people with MBEs, who knew that they could not be ignored. One of them was Bernardine Evaristo, for instance. So again, because of this positions of power that I find myself, I keep on thinking, who can I help if I have these three letters after my name, who then can't ignore me? And then what more... what lifeline might that extend to those who are in the same predicaments that I was? And that's a communal decision-making process to put the community first. And I remember a friend of mine saying, are you sure you're not just saying this because you really want the MBE? And I said, well, there's a reason why I write ensemble plays, all my plays are ensemble plays because I believe in the community, I think about them first and how can I serve them. Again, when you're a poet, you're a witness, again you're beholding the community so it was the same thought process, who can I help with this? So I think that's what it meant. In many ways, it calcified my impetus as an artist. But also, I've always existed in the grey areas. The easiest thing could have been, no, turn it down, raise the middle finger to the monarchy. The more difficult thing is to say, it isn't Prince Charles's fault that he was born, he can't do away with his tradition. What can he do with it? This is a man who edited an issue of The Voice magazine, which meant hundreds of thousands of people who didn't even know there was a black newspaper suddenly were interested in him. So, he's only, what, a year into his tenureship, but if you look at his history, I don't think he's strayed away from the complexities of his family. I think he's rising up to it in a way no one before him has. And this was some way of, not, I don't know, patting him on the back, because he doesn't need that, but acknowledging the hope in the legacy of the institution he was born into. But also, I've also never really hated or disregarded monarchies. As a Nigerian, chieftancies run and I've never sat in Nigeria and thought, down with the monarchy, therefore why should I do so here? So those are the debates that I'm still having. It'd be hypocritical of me to say, do that when I don't think of that in African context. I celebrate it. You know, so, I'm still working through that, but those are the nuances I've always thrived in, I've always existed as an artist, and negotiating that is far more interesting than just saying no to everything.

**PC** Could you do a little horizon scanning for us? What do you think the future holds for writers? Are there challenges? Are there opportunities?

**IE** The west is in trouble, financially. I think, the experiment of capitalism is imploding. We have finite sources. Population growth is still exploding across the world, which means that art, in order to survive, needs to wrestle itself from the grip of capitalism. And I think, writers have to figure that out, especially poets for whom there's no real money in this job anyway. So, there's room for artists to redefine what it means to be an artist, and I think that's the interesting horizon that we're running into. Climate change is only going to come a more pressing issue, and trying to create art forms that have very low carbon emissions, again, poetry, (chuckles) novels, you know, so I think if we're clever, if we're patient, we can define that.

**PW** What's next for you, Inua?

**IE** Again, I'm doing way too much. I have a libretto to write before the year is out, a stage play about climate change, I've written half of it. And the first episode of two TV series, one of which I've been working on for quite some time, this is another take on it, and the second is a popular TV show that I can't mention right now. So those are the things to do by December this year. And next year, hopefully another stab at a feature film, a new direction, a new adaptation of it. And then, yeah, I don't know. And more rest. I'm trying to figure out (chuckles) how to work rest into all of this.

**PW** What are the best things about being Inua Ellams?

**IE** Maybe not knowing who Inua Ellams is, always trying... trying to be open, and I don't know, the internal debate of that, it's an ongoing struggle... I'm a third culture kid, I've lived in all of these countries, all of them influencing me in ways that are still new to me. I think maybe that's just the best thing, the questioning. I love Terry Pratchett, who was this British writer who passed away, and he talked about how there was a philosopher, an academic in one of his novels, who accepted the fact that because he couldn't predict the immediate future, he had to walk through life with a constant look of surprise on his face, (Laughs). And I think I try to live like that. Maybe the attempt to live like that is the best thing about being Inua. Just trying to be humbled by the world. There's a great South African poet called Lebo Mashile and she says the process of being a writer, a poet, is integrally linked with the process of personal development. And I think, maybe that's just... I think that's the best thing about me, trying to get better. I mean, this is nothing new, lots of philosophers and thinkers and poets like me have always communicated the same thing in different ways, but I think, I think that's the best way.

**PC** Can we ask you to finish by just reading something from your work?

**IE** Yes. Yeah.

**PC** What are you going to read?

**IE** I will read 'F Sunflowers', which is the poem you mentioned you liked, Pat. This was a difficult poem for me to write in *The Actual*, and it's about depression and it's about suicide. One of my best friends in Dublin, who thought I'd be a writer well before I ever did, his name was Stephen Devine, he used to call me Shake El Spear because he knew that I loved Shakespeare, and my first syllable of my surname is Ellams, Shake El Spear. And also because he knew I had a Muslim background, so Shake El Spear. So all of those things. And in my penultimate year in Dublin, he took his life. And it was with him I was most literary with, most dexterous with language. So ever since then, I've always wondered about what drives someone to do that. And this poem was an attempt to take those notions and set it in a sort of black British working-class environment. [Reads from 'F Sunflowers']

**PW** That's beautiful.

**IE** Yes.

**PC** Inua, it's been great having you on the podcast.

**IE** Thanks for having me.

Terms of Use This content is owned by The Amplify Project or our licensors and all rights are reserved. If you would like to use any material from this transcript please contact either [PatriciaCumper@theamplifyproject.co.uk](mailto:PatriciaCumper@theamplifyproject.co.uk) or [PaulineWalker@theamplifyproject.co.uk](mailto:PaulineWalker@theamplifyproject.co.uk) See Terms of Use: <https://theamplifyproject.co.uk/terms-of-use/>