

Transcription – Amplify Podcast Special Guest Natalie Ibu

Voiceover: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Nottingham Playcast. The podcast is about to begin, please take your seats.

Hello and welcome to the Amplify podcast. I'm Craig Gilbert, Amplify Producer at Nottingham Playhouse. I'm once again holed up in my makeshift bedroom studio, having a series of interesting conversations with exciting theatre folk. Thanks for listening, and I hope you enjoy the show.

Craig - Hello, I'm Craig Gilbert - Amplify Producer at Nottingham Playhouse - and joining me today is the brilliant Artistic Director of Northern Stage, Natalie Ibu. How you doing, Natalie?

Natalie - Hi, Craig. I'm good. How are you?

Craig - Yeah, I'm pretty good. The sun is shining through the window today, which is very nice. It's very chilly outside though. So it's nice to be ensconced in my makeshift bedroom studio once again.

Natalie - It's definitely spring weather isn't it like sunny but crisp?

Craig - Yeah. How has - well we're coming to the end of what is, fingers crossed, our final lockdown. How has locked down mark three been for you?

01:15

Natalie - Yeah, gosh, I'm losing count of the lock downs. I think it's fair to say that this one has been harder. I don't know about you, but in the first one - like I often sort of romanticise and am nostalgic for lock down one where it was all about, you know, the novelty of working out how to work and live indoors and then lockdown two I moved to Newcastle, so it felt different. But this one just felt relentless. And so I am thrilled to be able to stretch out a bit and live a slightly more sort of public life than just me and my dog in the house.

Craig - Obviously, you're relatively new in your position as Artistic Director of Northern Stage, but had you had you been appointed when the first lockdown happened?

Natalie - So the interviews began just as people had stopped shaking hands. We didn't really understand what Coronavirus was, but we're just going to be, you know, mindful and then the second interview was cancelled, or obviously rescheduled, because lockdown had been announced. So this, this recruitment process spanned, I think two lockdowns. So I got the job in August, or that's when it was announced, which was when the pubs were open. And then I moved to Newcastle in October and I started in November. So I feel like the kind of run up to starting this job went through different iterations of kind of lockdown and pandemic strategy.

03:01

Craig – Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And what a thoroughly, well unique experience in beginning a new job and having to move. And tell me Natalie, where did you grow up? Where are you from?

Natalie - I'm from Edinburgh.

Craig - And when? Edinburgh Gosh, yeah. And so when does - up in Edinburgh, when does your relationship with the arts and theatre begin?

03:25

Natalie - When does it begin? Well, I think it began when I was like four and I started dance classes. I was a very serious dancer, I used to do seven classes a week and in another life, I would have been a professional dancer. But I would say that my experience with the arts was like rooted in participation, like it's rooted in dance classes, in youth theatre, in young writers groups, and that made it feel like second nature or made it feel like a potential home for me. And that's saying something considering I'm you know, a black working class woman from Scotland and in a time in which, you know, I was the only black kid in my school for 16 years and the only black kid on my street for forever. And that the participation and being involved and included, and feeling and the kind of relationship through doing was – like - so potent that it kind of overruled any sense of difference.

04:34

Craig – And what was it that piqued your interest in the first place, even in the dance classes I mean? Like is the Arts in your family? Or was it just something that made your eyes gleam when you found out about it?

04:48

Natalie - I don't know, you know. I mean, I'm an only child. So I think there's probably something about company and relationships, and getting out of my own head. I was also

chronically shy and so, when I think back to how shy I was, sort of odd and like sort of contradictory, I also have this passion for performing. But I think it must have been about, from my mum's perspective it gave me hobbies and things to do that meant she didn't have to entertain me. And from my perspective about finding my people, you know, and spending time with people that weren't myself or my mum.

05:30

Craig - So in your early engagement with the arts, through your dance classes and then moving on to youth theatre, was there a specific point when you thought, yes, this is the thing I'm going to dedicate my life to, and make a career in?

05:46

Natalie - So I remember wanting to be an actor – well, wanting to be a dancer first. And then my body was not made for ballet, which was the foundation of professional dance training at that time. And then I wanted to be an actor, because I think that's the only thing that I understood as being a kind of job in the arts. And I was really lucky to do the young writers programme at the Traverse. It was my local theatre, and the theatre that my school used to take me to, so I had that absolute luxury and privilege of being able to make a home in that building. And now, you know, thinking about what it was like to be a 16 year old rocking around those corridors, thinking I owned the place. And yeah, it is, you know, Scotland's leading new writing theatre and a real kind of seminal space for innovation and creation. But for me, it was just like a place that I hung out. And I remember meeting Philip Howard who ran the Traverse at the time, just as part of being on the young writers programme, and there was just something about that exchange that - actually, I don't remember the detail. I don't remember what we talked about. I don't know if he talked about his job. But I do remember that something clicked for me, that I in that moment knew that I wanted to be an Artistic Director.

07:13

Craig - Oh, that's really interesting. So the idea to be an Artistic Director, does that come before the desire to direct plays?

Natalie – Yes!

Craig - Oh, that's fascinating.

07:23

Natalie - Yeah. It's kind of strange, Craig, isn't it? And I think, I mean, it feels, it feels strange, because I feel like if there's a hierarchy of knowledge about jobs in the arts, you know, I feel like everyone knows Actor, some people know Director, nobody knows the Artistic Director as a rule. But on the other hand, you know, as I've grown into my

practice, it's become so clear to me that I'm an Artistic Director first and foremost, and directing was the route I took to achieve the Artistic Director practice, because the industry told me that Artistic Directors are Directors. Now, I'm really thrilled and excited that the sector is changing the way that it thinks about that role and changing who it feels can take up space in those roles. But for me, it felt like directing, I had to be a Director if I wanted to be an Artistic Director. And when I think about that decision now, when I think about that 17 year old and what she might have seen in Philip Howard who, you know, is not... you know, we don't look alike, we're of different classes, different gender, different races. I think I recognised in him the kind of facilitator/host/broker strand of what an Artistic Director does and a kind of connector. And it was that, I think, that I must have been attracted to because, you know, what gets me up in the morning is being able to broker connections between artists and ideas, between audiences and artists, between staff members, vision and funders - like to connect two disparate things and unite them around a shared idea, essentially. And so somehow, in that five minutes that I spent with him, I must have been able to get a sense of that, you know, because it feels that's the thing that I've held, you know, closely during my journey to Northern Stage, you know, which spans - if that encounter was when I was 17 and I am now 37, it spans 20 years. It's the thing that's kept me like, rigorous in my pursuit of good leadership.

10:02

Craig - Can I ask, because there's a lot of people listening to this who are emerging artists who will be interested in both the craft of directing, but also the idea of artistic leadership and the craft of that as well. I'm also aware that not a lot of people at the moment have the opportunity to go and do any training or anything, because we've all been home for so long. So I was wondering, were there - when you first made this decision, I asked this question to everyone by the way - were there any particular books or resources that were important to you, when you first began to pursue this?

10:42

Natalie - No is the answer, sorry. I really was trying to dig deep to think of... but I could say now, yes, now that I'm in the job. You know, I became an Artistic Director for the first time seven years ago and ran Tiata Fahodzi, a small touring company as part of the national portfolio. And it's at that point, isn't it when you get to a certain stage that people start locking you out of their practice? Because the assumption is we all know the job that we're doing. And actually, that's when my curiosity really piqued. I was like, how are other people doing this? So, you know, I've just read Chris Hayden's book about Artistic Directors, where he interviews a number of Artistic Directors across the UK and the US.

Craig - I've just read that as well. Who is your favourite?

Natalie - Oh, well, always my favourite is Oscar at the Public.

Craig - Oh, you know what mine too. I just think he's brilliant, isn't he?

Natalie - Yeah. He interviewed me for a job. Like, gosh, maybe like 10 years ago, and we've kept in touch ever since. And I just, you know, whenever I read anything that he's written or has been interviewed for, it's like, that's how I want to be when I grow up, there is just such radical generosity. That is an Artistic Director who's not a Director, who's a facilitator, a producer, a dramaturg, whose ego does not lead his practice. And who is absolutely motivated by serving the artists, and serving the audience, and serving their idea. That is like, yeah, peak artistic directorship for me. So I really enjoyed Oscar – I'm trying to think who else. But also just, you know, I didn't know that - and I've forgotten her name, sorry – but I didn't know that Soho Rep's Artistic Director was a Brit.

12:33

Craig - I didn't know that either. And I also really enjoyed – again, I've lost the name - but the person that runs the new writing stage at Lincoln Centre, I found their discussion of the commissioning model really interesting. And this idea of committing to artists, but writers in this instance, over a prolonged period. I think that's something we over here could really could really learn from because that model feels very broken to me. And I thought that was just fascinating.

13:10

Natalie - Well, there was another Artistic Director in America, who did the kind of four year cycles, right? So they commit to one artist for, well multiple artists, but four plays over five years or whatever. Do you remember that one?

13:26

Craig – Yes, I actually think that's what I'm talking about, and may have misremembered it as Lincoln Centre. Yeah,

13:32

Natalie - No, I feel like it was Manhattan Theatre Club or one of those types of venues.

13:39

Craig – I will find out and put it in the notes for anyone who wants to know.

Natalie - Yeah, we're really stumbling here. Sorry. We love the bit but we've forgotten all of the details.

13:50

But also, this will surprise people. I also love reading like Richard Dear's diaries and Nick Hytner's diaries, and again, couldn't be further from perhaps - yeah, we're very different. Great artists, but very, very different look, very different from very different backgrounds. But I love that shit. Like there's sort of company in the like, you know, when Richard Dear talks about just how awful it gets and how stressed he is and anxious, you know, like, oh, if Richard felt that it's okay that I feel you know, terrified.

14:25

Craig - I really enjoyed those books, too. In particular, Richard Eyre's and Peter Hall's diaries, I don't know if you've read those. Like obviously, as you said, these totemic figures in the culture of our past, but I really enjoy reading those books because when you read them, it feels to me like - admittedly, they were running the National Theatre - but it feels to me like the theatre was more central to our culture and our popular culture, then than it is now. I don't know whether you agree or disagree with that. But I'd be really interested to hear your thoughts. And if you do agree, why do you think that is?

15:12

Natalie - That's an interesting provocation. So I guess I agree that despite how important I think theatre is, that it doesn't sit currently at the centre of people's life, it isn't in direct conversation with popular culture, with mainstream culture. I don't know that I got the sense that that was any different in those times, the times they're writing about other than their perspective was different. So whether we as artists have a greater sense, and I mean this with no disrespect to the grandfathers of artistic directorship, but like whether we as artists have a wider reference point, that means that we know what people are watching on Netflix and what podcasts they're listening to, and what long reads they're reading and what they're tweeting about, which means that we can put our practice into perspective, in a way that that time it felt that theatre was sort of all-consuming and that perhaps you couldn't see the culture that sat outside of your own cultural industry. Perhaps. That's my argument. That's my provocation, Craig.

16:27

Craig - Yeah, no, I absolutely see that. And I don't know, I also wonder if it may be when you read those books - I'm speaking personally here, not for you by any means - just a tendency to glamorize the past. I think maybe just, when you're reading about it, it suddenly feels like the centre of everything doesn't. So yes, indeed, that may well be it. So let's, let's talk a little bit more about when your interest in the idea of artistic directorship begins at 17? What's the journey from there?

17:13

Natalie - So the journey was, okay, what do I do now? And I decided to apply to university, and I applied to a theatre with arts management degree. So, again, I often

think about - okay, let's assume that 17 year old Natalie didn't know what she's talking about, and basically was seduced by Philip Howard's office and decided she wanted to be an Artistic Director, then how did she manage to put together two degrees you know, a joint degree that is exactly the combination of skills that an Artistic Director needs in order to do the job. I had to clean up my childhood home a couple of years ago, and under my bed for all my university books. And they are exactly the kind of stuff that my day is filled with. So there was, there was some earnest deliberation around 'what did it mean to be an Artistic Director'. There was some understanding. So, I went to De Montfort in Leicester. I really wanted to leave Scotland. Ideally, I wanted to be in London, that's unchanged. But I really did not know what I was doing in terms of applying. And I really, again, sort of with hindsight, think that I should have gone to drama school actually and did a directing course at drama school. My degree was very academic, I can write a shit-hot essay, but I only had one directing module. So as someone who went in to, you know, into the arts, knowing that she would have to work harder, and knowing that it wasn't her natural space, because she was shy, because she didn't come from an artistic background, because of all the points of difference, and then doing a degree where you didn't actually read any plays, and you didn't actually get to sort of lean into developing your practice, I really felt shortchanged. But actually, that deficit was the thing that has led to my career trajectory because I came out - alright, I was about to leave, feeling really lacking and so absolutely lent into finding opportunities to develop my practice. So I applied for a residency just as I was handing in my final year dissertation on - it was called 'Whose Play Is It Anyway' - the relationship between the director and writer in new writing, which was a beautiful moment when I then went on to work at the Royal Court for a year. But applied for a residency, got it and was a trainee director at New Perspectives who, at the time, were based Mansfield but now are based in Nottingham. That gave me an opportunity to assist and to direct a Youth Theatre show. And yes, start to put some flesh on the bones of this kind of this ambition and desire - again thinking, you know, I think I'm under playing the director part because I did want to tell stories. I did get excited about being able to hold a room and go on a journey with collaborators to be able to make real words on the page. But I also had a really clear sense of the end game of where I wanted to end up and that was definitely running a building. That residency was really challenging. I was 20. As you know, I was a black woman and I felt out of my depth. And it was really difficult. And it was really challenging for someone who was an only child and super, super shy. And the grips of kind of misogyny were around and I felt that this space, couldn't, couldn't care for me, couldn't look after me, couldn't listen to me, couldn't give me any space. And so I went back to Scotland, after I completed that year, and went to the Traverse in marketing and press, to give myself a bit of a break, to kind of heal and really think about was this what I wanted to do. Because if I wanted to do it, it was going to be really hard and so I needed to own that. And also the opportunity to get back at the Traverse and back into building and developing those artist management skills. And after a year and a half of working there, I

was like, of course, I want to tell stories, of course I'm a director, and the next phase of my career commenced.

21:57

Craig - And how did it commence?

Natalie - Yeah, sorry, that was a cliffhanger, wasn't it? I just didn't want to talk for too long.

Craig - But no, it's a super interesting.

22:10

Natalie - So I left to go freelance and decided that I want, you know, that I was going to commit seriously to developing as a director and I think one of the things that was really beneficial for me was that, when I worked at the Traverse in Marketing and Press, I worked at the Traverse in Marketing and Press, you know. Like there was no kind of superiority complex, I didn't tell people I wanted to be a Director, I just got the job done. And as a result, people really respected me when I then said to them, I'm leaving to become a Director. People were willing to help me out, willing to open their rehearsal rooms, willing to make connections for me, because I'd done a good job for them in the job that they'd asked me to do, rather than feeling I was above it or, you know, that it was a plan B or whatever. And so I was able to assist at the Citizens. And then I started a company - I say company, it was really just a title, a company title and loads of spirit. And sort of realising that - I thought it was ridiculous that this generation of emerging artists were waiting to be told that they were a director, they were an actor, that they were a writer. That actually if you were doing it, then you were it. And that this generation of artists could animate, galvanize, activate each other because it only took one of us having an idea, right? So by me finding a play that I wanted to direct suddenly a designer had a practical opportunity, actors had an opportunity. So like, we just needed to have ideas. And so I started a tiny company called We Were Here, and we just made loads of work in cafes and rehearsal rooms and festivals. I mean, I say loads of work, I mean, it was like four shows over four months because, typically, as soon as I was in love with my own practice, and kind of like, you know, I don't need no company or buildings to give me a job as a Director. I'm a Director directing. I then was encouraged to apply for RTYDS so that's the Regional - I always get the T and the Y in the wrong place. Regional Theatre Young Directors Scheme. The Young is misleading, but yes.

Craig - It is misleading, isn't it. Especially because now it doesn't really mean anything, but it did then, didn't it, there was an age limit on it for a long time which I think has now been removed.

24:51

Natalie - Yeah, and this is doubly embarrassing because I'm also on the board of RTYDS. So sorry, Sue. We all struggle with it. But a couple of people in Scotland had encouraged me to apply and they had sort of given me the disclaimer that, you know, it's a really competitive scheme - still is, but certainly at the time - this person who was recommending it to me had gone for three times and not got it, but it would be a good experience for me. So I applied, you know, absolutely full of the joys of autonomy, really, and knowing that this thing I was just going to do because someone said I should for practice, but it didn't really mean anything to me. And of course, that meant that I got it first time, and I got the Royal Court. And so in 2008, I moved to London from Scotland - for a year, I thought, because by that point I'd fallen out of love with the idea of living in London and I hated the fact that it thought it was the centre of the world and if you weren't working in London, then you weren't working. I thought all of that was bullshit. So I was like, I'm gonna do my year at this place called the Royal Court, and I'm coming back to Scotland. And fast forward 12 years later, I finally got out of London. Now, I did spend some time in Derby setting up In Good Company, but yeah, it had its claws in me. So I was a Resident Assistant Director at the Royal Court for a year and that is where I really learnt my practice in terms of a maker and best practice, and collaboration, and dramaturgy and, you know, the fact that, like shows are made in previews. I didn't know that until 2008, until I worked on Jerusalem and The Girlfriend Experience and those shows transformed within those three previews. So it was really the making of me, I would say, and in my competence. And then... stop me whenever you want Craig?

26:53

Craig - No, I'm just interested in the idea of... so did you get to make work at the Royal Court?

27:02

Natalie - I got to do some rehearse readings. So unlike RTYDS now - I mean, one, it was in London, right. So it was actually sort of sneaky that it happened at all. And two, it was the one promise that they couldn't make, which was to give me a show, whereas all the other residencies offered a show and, in fact, and this should be top secret, but the Royal Court was actually not my first choice, right. So when you get the interviews, you have to write your first choice.

27:32

Craig - I was going to ask you about that because someone else on these podcasts has spoken about, you know, ranking the theatres, you want to spend in and it's part of your final interview you have to do that, isn't it?

27:45

Natalie - Yeah. So I got this call from Sue on the ride home, on the train home, and she was like, 'I'm calling... I notice the Royal Court is not your first choice, but we want you.' And the reason was because of the show, right? And also because, like, I'm not, I'm not a labels Queen, you know, titles don't mean anything to me. And I wanted to, you know, I'd come from making work so I wanted to continue making work and those other theatres offered that experience. And so yes, but then - and this is very dated, also the context is, it's 2008. Like, you know, the industry's approach to the kind of London theatre scene and those venues with legacy and, and history, the idea was that you really didn't turn down the Royal Court. And so I didn't. But yeah, to answer your initial question, Craig, no, I didn't get to direct a full show, which in the next stage of my career became really problematic. And I struggled with not having directed a show at the point of graduating, I guess, from the Royal Court. So that was 2009. I struggled with that for maybe seven years. But I was getting all the meetings because of my CV, and who I'd assisted on and who I'd assisted with, the shows I'd worked on and the Royal Court, but everyone wanted to see the show, and you don't get a show until you've had a show. And I didn't have the resources to be putting on a fringe show myself, you know, so I had to think differently about my trajectory. And again, really think about what I'm in it for. Yes, I want to direct plays. Yes, I want to tell stories, but I always need to be the lead artist. I need to be the Director in the room. And so found a journey into directing in drama schools but also being an Associate Director at High Tide, leading on talent development, a Producer at Roundhouse and then finally was like, you know what the universe is saying to me that it doesn't want me to be a Director because I'm getting all of these producing gigs, and none of these directing gigs. So I decided that I was going to just commit full throttle to producing and left London to go to Derby to set up In Good Company for them. And then, you know, typically, life's irony is that within seven months I'd got the Artistic Director job at Tiata Fahodzi, which did allow me to both produce, and direct, and also be an Artistic Director. And so back to London, I came, but that no show really threatened to fuck with me.

30:54

Craig - But you were making in drama schools and stuff, which I think is a thing people don't often think about and obviously so much of our industry feels like a closed shop, and I think that area in particular, feels very closed off to a lot of people. So, I think people listening would be really interested to know, how did you get into making work at drama schools?

31:17

Natalie - That's a very good question - how did it happen? So I think that the first - well, I know how it started. So Royal Court opened some doors, the fact that I'd been there for a year, that - again, I'm talking within the context of like, 2009. I think there was a sense that directing in drama schools was not a fertile place. And I think that I enabled some

drama schools to get a kind of taste of a Royal Court practice or approach and was accessible in a way that, you know, Jeremy Herrin or Mike Longhurst, or whoever might not be, although Mike has actually directed at Drama Centre. So I started by getting to go in and do some professional practice courses - modules where I'd go in, work with them on particularly challenging new writing, pieces of work around sort of Nick Payne's repetition, or rhythm, or punctuation, and sight reading and the expectations of rehearsed readings, and begin to build relationships with drama schools through that, and then the opportunity to direct. I think the shows that I've directed at drama schools have come through relationships with the principals so Jo Reed at LAMDA, which meant I did the one project there. Ed Kemp at RADA. And we did a collaboration with Tiata Fahodzi and commissioned Charlene James for the final year. And, you know, some work at Drama Studio. Lots of conversations at East 15. So really, just like, building those relationships, having those conversations, identifying what I can bring that is going to complement and be additional to the syllabus or to the teaching that's happening. So I was really trading off that Royal Court dramaturgy in contemporary plays, because it was a time where people weren't really getting access to new work, the work that they would most likely be doing first, like the kind of Theatre 503 work or Soho, rather than - I think drama schools were preparing people to go to the RSC for three years. And that was only happening for one or two graduates a year and so I was able to make an argument that, you know, you're probably going to get your first job from me, actually, this is the kind of work I'm making. So like, you need to get your students and potential graduates ready for this work. But that's all changed now.

34:14

Craig – Yes, certainly the landscape has changed quite a lot. But it's fascinating just to discuss how an emerging practitioner can get the opportunity to develop their practice in that sphere. I think it's the thing a lot of people don't think about because I think, even now, it still feels very closed off. I mean, those doors are opening now and particularly over the last 18 months, I think they seem to be opening very much, even if they're not quite blown wide open just yet. I just think it's interesting to talk about. And then obviously you go off to Derby and set up the magnificent In Good Company, and then very quickly get your first time artistic directorship. I wonder what was... so you get that artistic directorship at Tiata Fahodzi having not directed a lot of work, and I wonder, what was that conversation? Or well, having not directed a lot of *visible* work let's say, what was that conversation, when you go to the interview for that job? Are you saying to the board of the company, I'm here primarily as an enabling producer who might make work, or are you setting your stall out saying, I do this as well, I'm more visible as a producer, but I do this as well and I'm going to do both should you appoint me? What's the conversation?

35:41

Natalie - It's the latter. I'm an Artistic Director who directs and what I'm bringing is vision, networks, entrepreneurship. Like, you know, I am who I am. And, I mean, absolutely, there was a question around directing and I gave some references who'd seen my work, and I'm lucky that those references are high profile, because of my time at the Royal Court. It's unlikely, though, that they will have seen many people's work, because those boards are not really getting around to see shows. So I think it's just ridiculous, isn't it. The concept that you've done three shows that I might not have seen but I know you've done them, versus me on the table with maybe not the three shows on there, or not three shows that mean anything to you necessarily, but they are still appointing fairly blind. But I think I was very clear about what I was bringing, and it just happened to be that they needed a producer, they needed someone who could think, a Director who could think as a Producer. Who could model up projects, who could talk to co-producers, who could sell, and get the sector and funders and audiences behind the vision. And that's something that I can do. It was about to brag quite heavily there and I caught myself. But that's what I do. If I do anything, it's that. I'm a salesman, it's that marketing that I did back in, you know, second job out of university, like I know how to sell an idea. And I know how to package it, and I know who to talk to. And so they had to make a decision about you know, did they want a safer choice in terms of shows made but with no guarantee that those that those shows would get made. I could guarantee we would make some shows.

37:43

Craig - And so after having decided right at the beginning that you wanted to be an Artistic Director, then you have the opportunity to run a company for the first time. What I'd be really interested to find out about is, how did actually doing it match up to your mission and expectations?

38:04

Natalie - Yeah, but I didn't expect to be running a company. So I think my expectations were rooted in my experience at the Royal Court and my experience as a 17 year old at the Traverse. And those are very particular experiences about having a building to invite people to, and having a building to hold space in and to embody the politics and the vision - right through to, you know, your experience crossing the threshold to sitting in an auditorium watching a show. It's very different when you're running a company. So you've control over the vision, you have control over the shows that you wish to make, but when you're a band one - which is the smallest of the three bands from the Arts Council - touring company you're reliant on co production, and you're reliant on the borrowing building's audience. Because you're transient, you're the visitor, you're the guest. Right? This is actually Northern Stage's audience that I am borrowing in order to share Good Dog. They're not really my audience because I'm not there enough for them

to be my audience. You're reliant on the relationship that building has with its geography. So it was challenging for some of the reasons that I wanted to be an Artistic Director. You know, it was great to be able to invite artists to come and think with us, to collaborate, to be able to take rest on artists in ways that risk might not have been taken on me, or were taken on me, but to cultivate and activate was really exhilarating and exciting. And to be able to, like have the back of so many amazing artists. But the kind of producing part of it, the making work that tours was really frustrating, because I wanted things to be done differently and better. But you're the guest, right? You've been invited round to someone's house for dinner. You don't get to change the cutlery or the menu or the wallpaper. And so, yeah, the end goal for me was always by running a building, which is where we've got to.

40:37

Craig - Yeah, absolutely. And I wonder... you mentioned it directly at the start, that language you used around artistic directorship, it's very much about being a host and hospitality. I suppose almost like you are planning a party, if you like, being the best party host ever. I wonder, can you talk a little bit about the Artistic Director as host and what that means to you?

41:04

Natalie - Yeah, you may know that I launched an audience development methodology, I guess, called the friendship model at Tiata Fahodzi and the metaphor is built on parties. It was inspired by Don Walton, who used to run Eclipse. On the very first day of my job at Tiata Fahodzi, the Arts Council launched the Creative Case for Diversity in 2014 – [we were] sitting watching and Don was saying audience development is really simple as it's just inviting people to your party. And it felt so radical and brilliant, and I just thought about it for a moment, and I was like yeah but you don't throw a party unless you've got friends first. And so I built this whole model around this metaphor, about theatre being that really annoying friend who throws this elaborate party, and then starts to freak out that no one's gonna come and so starts calling people randomly that she hasn't spoken to ever, or in five years. She's that beg friend, like she's desperate and a bit annoying. And, you know, you're really scared when you introduce your other friends to her that she's going to... sometimes she'll be on her best behaviour and be amazing and life changing. And sometimes she'll be neurotic and awful. And you'll be embarrassed by her. So you're right to draw my attention to the fact that the language that I use to talk about my practice is all about sort of radical welcome, about generosity, about hosting, about holding space, invitation, which takes us full circle and that thing of why did I start dancing and youth theatre in the first place, right, to have company. And so it's become really significant in my practice, but I see the role of Artistic Director as being of service, I guess, to artists and to audience and to places, or a place. That service can be about giving you what you want, and what you need. And sometimes it's about not, and

agitating and provoking and stimulating. So it's not, um, the service is not without edge. I see, you know, I hate the word gatekeeper, so it's not that, but we're like stewards of this public resource, this resource for Newcastle and the North East, which is a large producing theatre with three spaces. And it's my job to look after it, to care for it, but for you to be able to access it whenever you want. Yeah, I'm like the kind of - do you ever watch that dating programme where they go to a restaurant first date? First Dates! Yeah. What's the guy's job that always meets them and takes them to the bar and then brings over the date?

Craig – Oh, he's like the Maître D?

Natalie - That's me, babes. I see myself as the Maitre D.

Craig - It's so funny you should say that because I was watching that programme the other night, and the same thought linked up in my head. I was like, Fred – it is Fred isn't it? Fred's the Artistic Director. And I think the idea of theatre as a restaurant, I mean metaphorically, is actually a really useful one because I think there's something... it's what you said about the difference between giving you what you want and agitating. And I think it's freeing yourself from ego enough as a person who decides on things in a theatre to say, Okay, what I do is I get to make the menu. But I don't get to decide what people have. Yeah, I think that's a really useful metaphor for me.

45:24

Natalie – And particularly for regional theatres like Nottingham Playhouse and ourselves. My job is to provide something for everyone, like I need something for the vegans, something that's gluten free, and something that is affordable. I need the full buffet, and my job is to curate that buffet and sometimes I'm the person in the kitchen sweating over that stove. But sometimes I'm just 'yes chef'ing and taking those dishes to audiences. Yeah, I think restaurant as a metaphor is a really brilliant one. You know, if you think about, there is transaction, but there's also hospitality and welcome. There is a kind of patron-first approach, patron-centred, but then also like the chef is the star. Right? So I really enjoy that as a metaphor, maybe I'll move on from parties. Essentially yeah, I see myself as the Maitre D.

46:34

Craig –I'd love to just unpick further. I know we're pressed for time now, but just very quickly, is... I think that's a brilliant metaphor, certainly very useful for me. Where does the idea of agitation fit in that? And specifically regional theatre, I think.

46:52

Natalie - Well, I think part of the reason that I wanted to run a building was I wanted to go on a journey with audiences. And I think the relationship with audiences allows us the

space for agitation and provocation. So I think about the things on the menu, I'm going to go back to the metaphor because once I've got one, I won't let it go. But you know those things where you're like, oh I like this, I like that, like, I like three ingredients that are in this dish, I'm not so sure about celeriac. But I like these three things so I'm going to take a punt because, you know, I love this restaurant and it never lets me down, it's quality and I really enjoy this chef. And maybe also the waiter has given me a kind of testimony or an experience, they've supported and facilitated me to take some risks. And I'm going to take this thing that might agitate me - like, that's the equivalent, right? It's like thinking about the different work, or the work that the audience's might not think they would like, or that they want or need, but it's packaged in a way - and this is, isn't this the job of all of us, to find a way to package it? So there's a few things that you like, as well as the thing that you're not sure about, to support you in being the most courageous version of yourself and taking some risks. So that is Comms, Audience Development, that is our Box Office, that is our relationship with you as an audience member, so that you feel safe here. And you know that even if you don't like it, I've got you and I want good things for you, and I'm not against you. It's all about the kind of context with which we are agitating. I'm not in it to just point fingers and provoke, and anger, and challenge for the sake of it. I'm in it for a better world, for a better audience person, for a better artist, I want better versions of ourselves and that means I care about you. It means that I feel responsible to take you on a journey. It's always going to be a little bit more than you think you can handle, but I believe that you can handle it. You know? That was a lot of mixed metaphors but it's all about relationship for me basically, that doesn't always need to be me and the audience member. It's the audience member and the venue, it's a relationship with us - the brand, the name.

49:38

Craig - Yeah, brilliant. Well thank you so much for that, Natalie. I just have two quick-fire questions to finish off. Can you tell us about the last work of art that absolutely blew your mind?

49:55

Natalie - Oh, dude, these questions. Of course I go... I've never seen a work of art before. That absolutely blew my mind? Okay, so if you follow me on Twitter I'm endlessly going on about this... But, Craig, This Is Us - not my season, but the TV show, the American TV show, five seasons, it is exquisite. And I call it, I don't care what anyone says, it is art. TV is art. And it's this incredibly detailed, eloquent, quiet portrayal of a family over decades, over generations. And it tells a story of multiple generations simultaneously. And in each episode, it manages to expand, to grow additional branches surprise you with connections between a couple who you thought were just a random couple but end up being like the Granddaughter of the original couple - it's just incredible. Like, it floors me, the storytelling and there is not one episode, maybe one or two, where

I won't cry. It's just so emotive and just really beautifully told, and really complex and accessible.

51:20

Craig - That sounds like an absolutely brilliant recommendation. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today, Natalie. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Natalie - Thank you.

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