

S7 Ep1: Dirty Hare

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Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma Dirty Hare are an award winning theatre company that have received critical acclaim on both their shows Belly Up and Gunter It is made up of director and facilitator Rachel Lemon, historian and writer and musician Lydia Higgman, and actor and writer Julia Grogan. Dirty Hare's award winning production of Gunter transfers to the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs following its sold out premiere at summer hall at the Edinburgh Fringe last year. Welcome to the podcast, Julia, Rachel and Lydia, aka Dirty Hare.

Rachel Lemon: Hello.

Susan Wokoma: See, there we go.

Rachel Lemon: There we go. And we really can't change our name now.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, actually, we're going to start with that. I normally start with another question. Why Dirty Hare? Talk us through that.

Rachel Lemon: Very good question.

Lydia Higgman: Probably. I should probably speak.

Rachel Lemon: Go on.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Lydia Higgman: So the Hare thing is, actually, my mum. My mum loves hares and

Susan Wokoma: which kind of Hare?

Lydia Higgman: Hare like the rabbit. Well, yeah, no, the rabbit thing. I don't know why.

She's always just loved them. There's little statues of them all around my house. she's got a tattoo of it. I've got a tattoo of a Hare. My sister does. Julia does. Rachel's the only one without.

Rachel Lemon: I've got a fox, but not a Hare

Lydia Higgman: So it's always Hare thing.

Lydia Higgman: Um and when Julia and I made our first show Belly Up, we were Daring Hare and Rachel directed it, which is when you kind of came into the game

Rachel Lemon: which is when I came on board and I thought, so we were called Daring Hare, which I found a little bit.. I mean, I wonder what you think. Slightly entrepreneurial and

Julia Grogan: quite corporate.

Rachel Lemon: I mean, we wanted to make work that was quite, like, messy, fun, chaotic. And I thought Daring Hare just felt slightly like we sell cars.

Susan Wokoma: It sounds like an energy drink.

Rachel Lemon: Energy drink.

Julia Grogan: Okay.

Julia Grogan: It's savage to hear because, there's a lot of fights about this, but, yeah, I'm glad we're settled it.

Rachel Lemon: And we thought just in case people might kind of know who we were, which really, they didn't really, at that point, we would change it a bit, but not too much. So daring to dirty.

Susan Wokoma: Okay.

Rachel Lemon: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: I prefer dirty.

Rachel Lemon: Thank you.

Susan Wokoma: so my first question to everybody. I'll start with you. What is your

earliest memory of. theatre.

Julia Grogan: Oh, gosh. Right. Right in. My earliest... So I grew up in Stratford on Avon. So I grew up down the road.

Susan Wokoma: Right- theatre land.

Julia Grogan: Yeah - theatre land. So even our, like, taxis are called, like, Othello taxis and stuff. So I was like, probably from quite a young age at primary school, we were having like, like, theatre workshops and stuff because everyone, it's kind of the language of the town is theatre. So I guess, yeah, I kind of grew up with theatre and, my grandma used to pay for, me, my mom and my sister to go and see, like, Mary Poppins or, like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang at Christmas. Every year we'd go for a little Christmas treat. So, yeah, my early. Yeah, it's basically sort of family fun.

Susan Wokoma: Wonderful.

Susan Wokoma: What about you, Rachel?

Rachel Lemon: I think similarly, it's Christmas. Christmas to me was about theatre. So I, like, I grew up in a town, farnum common, near Slough. And there wasn't really loads of theatre. but every year, because my birthday's Christmas Eve, we would go to the Wickham Swan to see the panto. So I think it's that I would take my five friends or my mum would take my five friends and we'd m go see the panto. And then I think the moment that I was like, okay, this is... Or I felt at least like, I was making it is. In my secondary school, every year, someone got picked to do the panto and I did a production of lion, the witch and the wardrobe. And I was. And I was really, like, not into

theatre at that point, but it was just like a bit of street cred to do the panto.

Susan Wokoma: That is so strange because that would.

Susan Wokoma: Not be street cred where I grew up from.

Susan Wokoma: If I got picked to be in the panto, I'd be like 'booo', but that's cool, though.

Rachel Lemon: I might have thought of it as street cred, actually. People around me might have thought, like, maybe not street cred, but, like, it was like, yeah, you had to be like the... Anyway, so I was gonna do this panto and then I did this panto and that's when I sort of thought, like, yeah, I'm into this as a thing.

Lydia Higgman: Why don't you say about when you.

Lydia Higgman: Drove into your head teacher's car?

Rachel Lemon: I did, actually. I was so happy when I did the panto. I was 17 and. No, I was about 18. I was like. I was in year 13 and I had this little Peugeot car. And afterwards I was so happy that I'd done this panto. I was feeling so good. And they got, like, the cast, there was maybe like 80 of them had got me this balloon and I had my little peugeot and I was so happy. I was smiling so big that I could, like, my eyes. Like, my eyes were really small because I was smiling so much. Anyway, I reversed and I went backwards. The balloon was in the back rear windscreen and bang, I hit into my deputy head's vintage Porsche. Yeah. And then I had to sell the car and couldn't pay for any of that damage.

Susan Wokoma: That's the joy of acting. That's what it does.

Rachel Lemon: That's what it does. I was smiling so much. I just loved it.

Susan Wokoma: Basically no one park around here when your show's on.

Susan Wokoma: Cause it's gonna get absolutely decimated.

Susan Wokoma: How about you, Lydia?

Lydia Higgman: okay. I remember seeing, as a kid. My mum took me to, because I grew up near Julia as well, in Leamington in the midlands. I remember seeing a production of beauty and the Beast and thinking it was absolutely epic, finding it very scary. but that was probably, I think that was probably the first. Yeah, the first show I saw was probably that. But I mean, I said, I'm not. These guys went to drama school and sort of theatre is like a big part of your DNA. I mean, I was. I am less so, involved in theatre.

Rachel Lemon: Yeah. Lydia hates theatre.

Lydia Higgman: I hate theatre.

Susan Wokoma: What are you doing here?

Susan Wokoma: Get out.

Susan Wokoma: Stay.

Susan Wokoma: Well, let's talk about that. So both of you, you trained at Rose Bruford, right?

Rachel Lemon: Both of us did.

Susan Wokoma: So how did you form? Tell us the origin story of the Spice Girls? Basically, how did it happen?

Julia Grogan: We met on a hockey pitch when we were 13.

Susan Wokoma: I knew it was going to be.

Susan Wokoma: Something like that

Julia Grogan: and we were playing against each other. Lydia was the most amazing hockey player and I was absolutely. I was shit. I was really shit.

Lydia Higgman: And I was fucking great [they all are laughing]

Julia Grogan: And she took the ball off me and like, ran off and I was like, oh, my God, that girl's got such long legs. That's so cool. And then, so we became best friends, obviously, and sort of grew up together. and then, me and Rachel trained as actors together, when Lydia and I wrote Belly Up. [she clears her throat/ chokes up] sorry, it's not an emotional thing. [they laugh] we wrote belly up together and, Rachel came on board to direct it. And the three of us, I think because we all come at it from such different angles, that's what makes our work maybe a bit more different. It's what makes dirty Hare work. We've got, Lydia's heavily musical and historical and does writing.

Rachel Lemon: It's also probably useful to say that Lydia didn't come on board as a writer. Like, Lydia came on board to help you with the history and then you ended up sort of co writing it together and then suddenly you found yourself writing.

Lydia Higgman: Exactly.

Julia Grogan: So it's fun working with people. I used to be really scared. Like the first time we all created together. it's very natural for me to sit and just be quite isolated and, just sit in my boxes for, like, 8 hours and not talk to anyone. And the way that Rachel makes work is, well, you can maybe talk.

Rachel Lemon: Yeah, well, I think there was just. So we did belly up, and that was in a much more formal way where I was the director. I came on board to direct it. Julia and Lydia had written it together and Lydia had done the music. And then I think when we were thinking about Gunter, I was in a place of finding, I guess, like, wanting to create in a more devised way. And so it was a very different process. The way that we made Gunter compared to how we made Belly Up. it was much more like, you know, we had the story beats and then we would. I mean, Norah and Hannah, who are, the actors in Gunter are like a huge... We need to give a big, big shout out to them because they were a huge part of the creation process. We would do, like, you know, like, exercises and improvising to story beats and basically just, like, failing a lot and making really, really bad stuff. It was much more like you were writing. You were writing and we were all writing in response to the thing that was happening in the room, rather than, like, you being on your own, which is how you would normally write.

Rachel Lemon: Like, Julia-

Julia Grogan: We'd go home and sort of work on that Because I love words and stuff, whereas you guys are amazing. it's constantly thinking about what the audience experience is. The first thing Rachel did when we got in the room to make it was we drew out exactly who we'd want to come and see the show. So we drew out, like, a mate from school, Nana. Like, someone who'd never been to theatre before. Someone who's, like, just whoever and, stuck them all over the wall and then you're making for them. And that's such a beautiful thing to learn from these guys is the openness and inviting people into rehearsals really early on to see the work so that you get immediate feedback. Whereas I've very been in this shell. [they all start to laugh]

Rachel Lemon: Julia cried a lot.

Susan Wokoma: I've got to say, having gone to drama school, there's so much about kind of not what the audience experience sort of isn't your business. You just, like, you tell the story and you don't do anything to pander to them. You don't do anything to kind of steer them. As long as you're playing your actions, that's all you care about.

Susan Wokoma: So it's a lot

Susan Wokoma: I can understand that. That is so nerve wracking. To kind of have the audience be a part of the experience. Straight from the top.

Susan Wokoma: so, well done.

Susan Wokoma: You're very brave.

Speaker D: that would terrify me!

Susan Wokoma: So you guys are quite new, so you formed in 2021, roughly?

Dirty Hare: Yeah

Susan Wokoma: Well, you've known each other for a long time, but in terms of Dirty Hare it's been, like, 2021. So, I mean, that's really exciting to know that there are companies, still being made in this really kind of treacherous, scary time for art, which is kind of how it's always been. So let's talk about Gunter, your second show that's going to be here after an amazing run at Fringe. So was that your first stab at, the fringe as a company, or had you been up before with other shows? And obviously, you don't come from, like, this acting background, but had you experienced the fringe? And what was that experience like, having your show go and do so well?

Rachel Lemon: What, you two, you'd never been to the fringe, right?

Julia Grogan: I'd never taken a show up. I'd been, to go and see the. See the odd show. Yeah.

Rachel Lemon: And I've taken one show. I went with a show called bottom that Willie Hudson wrote in 2019. I wasn't. I mean, I was kind of producing that. I think because we were also producing this, it was like a very, very different beast because we were, like, in charge of the whole thing. I mean, we kind of.

Rachel Lemon: We were.

Rachel Lemon: We were in a place. The reason we decided to go to Edinburgh as much as, like, in lots of ways, politically, I find it quite, tricky in terms of how much it

costs all of those things and who is there and who's watching your work, but it also feels like one of the only places that exists to make work. And we were in a place where I think we were all feeling quite stuck and feeling like we had lots of projects and things we wanted to make, but we didn't know how to make them anyway, so we kind of decided very late on that we were going to make a show in about the January, February of that year and then made it very quickly. And I think that was a very particular. It was a very different beast to produce it and do it, like, make the whole thing happen. Find how, like, work out how to pay our actors and find rehearsal space. We rehearsed in a Quaker house. That was-

Lydia Higgman: Amazing, actually

Rachel Lemon: Amazing, yeah! Every morning we would check in by standing, if you. If you're moved to speak stand. We kept it really, really calm. What about you in Edinburgh, you guys?

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Julia Grogan: We were similar vibes, weren't we? was your similar vibes?

Julia Grogan: I think, yeah. I mean, you might have something more interesting to say than me. I kind of just went up. I went to go and see some shows up there. I mean, it's hard to go up to Edinburgh. It's really like, it's really expensive, like Rachel was saying. And, I, had been up for a year, we went up together for a week, but it's a really amazing, space and we met some amazing, like, makers up there and people who are really, like, trying to change things. And it's a real, like, pressure, cooker of cool work, which it can feel quite elbows out trying to get crowds in, but everywhere it's really

supportive and, like, So I think it's an amazing place to make, to make work. And it was an absolute joy to do when we got that fringe first. I mean, you. You've always wanted to get one. It felt like a real cool moment.

Lydia Higgman: it did feel very.

Lydia Higgman: It felt at, ah, points quite hairy trying to get the show up there, though, because we'd made it so quickly and we were producing it. And when we actually got to Edinburgh, for some reason, we got there a day early and we didn't really realise, like, there's an extra day and we hadn't really kind of worked out, ah, what it was. We sort of knew something was off. But anyway, there was a. There was basically an extra night before our tech, and the night that we thought was the night before our tech, we get a, phone call from the venue saying, hey, guys, you're half an hour/ 40 minutes into your tech. Where are you guys at? And I'm like, making a Jamie Oliver.

Julia Grogan: oh, both the actors aren't.

Lydia Higgman: Both the actors aren't even in Scotland. Hannah and Norah are coming the next day when we thought our tech was. Bear in mind, right, so you get a four hour tech, which is like nothing, nothing, and then beyond that, there's no wiggle room in Edinburgh, obviously.

Rachel Lemon: And we've never made the show before.

Lydia Higgman: We've never made the show

Rachel Lemon: It's like.. swallowing nails.

Rachel Lemon: It's like really-

Lydia Higgman: blood, guts music, like all this sound stuff for the music,

Susan Wokoma: Wow - I cannot wait to see this.

Julia Grogan: it's absolute chaos.

Lydia Higgman: And so it was like this... Brian phoned us back. He's like, I'm just going to check because it must be me.

Lydia Higgman: I must have got something wrong.

Julia Grogan: We basically.

Julia Grogan: gaslit him.

Susan Wokoma: Manipulation. [they laugh]

Lydia Higgman: 'That will be you, mate. That will be you.' No, it was us. and, it was like this blind panic of like, oh, my God. Just trying to get the banjo and guitar and everything and I phoned Julia, and that night, Julia had, like, gone for.

Julia Grogan: I'd gone for a mental health walk. Like, I'd gone for, like, a really peaceful, like, oh, cool. I'm in Edinburgh. It's been a bit of a rocky year.

Julia Grogan: Oh, it's so hard to make theatre [they laugh]

Speaker A: Get this phone call from Lydia being.

Julia Grogan: Like, Jules, just like, sit down for a sec. I was like, what the hell's happening? I thought someone. To be honest, I thought someone had died. I was like, guys.

Lydia Higgman: So I was like 'just be calm'

Julia Grogan: She went, just be calm. But we're meant to be in tech right now, and I've never. My breath. My breathing system just disappeared. I actually. I'm actually going into cardio breath now. I was like,

Susan Wokoma: your body's remembering.

Julia Grogan: Oh, my God.

Rachel Lemon: No, actually, what you said is, oh, my God, babe.

Julia Grogan: No.

Julia Grogan: Yeah - I went, oh, my God, babe, I can't breathe.

Rachel Lemon: Babe.

Rachel Lemon: I can't breathe, babe, I can't breathe.

Julia Grogan: So I staggered home. These two turn up in the. In the wagon phone, me

from outside saying, we've realised we can't fit you in. So I'm like, oh, my God. Like, running to summer hall through edinburgh, getting this uber. The guy's telling me about how he nearly missed his best friend's wedding. And I was like, this isn't.

Julia Grogan: the same!!

Julia Grogan: And, I mean, we got there. I mean, thank God. shout out to amy daniels, the lighting designer who was there. we run in. She's calmly programming everything. Like, we've lost 2 hours.

Lydia Higgman: She bumped into someone in sainsbury's who said, I think you're meant to be in your tech tonight.

Susan Wokoma: No.

Speaker A: And so we had 2 hours, and we kind of loosely did what? Julia. Julia's fantasy. Played every role.

Julia Grogan: I played every role for 3 hours.

Susan Wokoma: This is incredible. I'm so glad I asked this. I knew that there was, like, edinburgh story because I was like, hang on a minute. Like, you guys have, like, put this show together.

Susan Wokoma: You're here at the royal court.

Julia Grogan: It was CHAOS.

Lydia Higgman: It was absolute chaos

Susan Wokoma: That is incredible to have that experience and then have the show come here to the royal court. Because I feel like from a sort of outsider looking in, you think that, okay, you know, the process of making a play is very measured, and it's this. And you have time to do that. You've just thrown this show together in a really short amount of time, have this nightmare kind of nearly non-existent tech, and then it's found its voice and its life enough that the guys here at the royal court want to put it on.

Clip of a song from the show: I think it's time to hear from another one. Have we got a filip in attendance? Johnson son. Yes, I'm here and I have my truth to be told. Elizabeth Gregory's a witch and a scold. If you'd like to go from the start, Philip, perhaps it would be good to tell the jury when you first noticed a change in Elizabeth. Oh, and if you could keep it within an 8 bar rhythm too, that would be fantastic. Well, I noticed in mass, at the saying of the piece that Elizabeth and Gregory would start to sneeze. I had it cold. She shouts when she has something to say. On the occasion in question, she refused to play. Are you claiming, Philip, that Elizabeth is working against Christ? She's certainly not working with him. Interesting. Next to the staff, Alistair foot Brian, Gunter's neighbour.

Susan Wokoma: Let's just give your play some space and some time. So you're a historian, and so I know that this is only your second.

Susan Wokoma: Play after belly up.

Susan Wokoma: And that was Done in a very different way. Would you say that history and looking at history is kind of at the core of what dirty Hare does?

Lydia Higgman: Yeah, I think. I mean, yeah, the two shows we've made have been historical. I think that, we were sort of chatting about this the other day. I think we. Whether history is the root, it's more. We're interested in power, really. We were saying that yesterday.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Lydia Higgman: There's a lot. There's definitely, power structures that we're responding to in both of the plays. and I think, to be honest, when I first pitched the play to Rachel and Julia, the story itself is so kind of obscure.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: And could you talk us through the story? So it's the retelling, of a true story of a witch hunt in the early 16 hundreds.

Lydia Higgman: Yeah, exactly.

Lydia Higgman: Exactly.

Lydia Higgman: So it starts at a football match, and football at this time is actually illegal because it seems, Yeah. Inciting violence and, it's not.

Lydia Higgman: It's not football. It's.

Lydia Higgman: Well, no, but it's not foot- [they laugh at the irony]

Lydia Higgman: Well, exactly. Exactly.

Lydia Higgman: Imagine that.

Lydia Higgman: it's not football. Like, we sort of cool haircuts and shit and. Anyway, but it's like, it's called, like, shrove tide football. It's got tradition in a kind of mediaeval route where you basically have to get a ball from one village to the next village and you can throw it and kick it. And people actually do end up sort of getting done in. Anyway, there's a football match and a fight breaks out between these two brothers and another boy, who is the son of Brian Gunter, who's the kind of bad protagonist in this story, and he basically kills the two boys, the brothers that are fighting his son, and he isn't sentenced to anything because he's acquitted because football is illegal. And, the mother of these two brothers who have been killed goes out into the village and starts to chat shit about him and, you know, slanders him and whatever else. And that's the kind of. That's the kind of inciting incident of this big revenge plot where he's like, right, you've hurt my ego in public.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Lydia Higgman: I'm going to start this campaign to have you executed for witchcraft. And the way that he does that is by coercing his youngest daughter into faking possession. And it's a completely true story. there are some maddening bits of archival record that are missing. and we deal with that, the kind of gaps and the fragmentation of history and the way that. Whose role it is to read into that and whose role it is to write history, blah, blah, blah. And all those kind of, all those kind of bigger historical questions we kind of deal with in the play. but, yes, I sort of suggested it to rach.

Rachel Lemon: Yeah. And Lydia. Lydia is. Lydia wants, like, Lydia isn't naturally, would you call yourself not naturally a performer? But Lydia's in the play,

Susan Wokoma: you're in it?

Rachel Lemon: Lydia's in it

Lydia Higgman: oh my gosh, yeah

Rachel Lemon: Lydia frames the whole thing and Lydia.

Susan Wokoma: So you're the historian in it?

Lydia Higgman: Yeah

Susan Wokoma: Oh, so you are the historian in it?

Lydia Higgman: So I'm like, yes, yes,

Susan Wokoma: it's you! welcome! but you're not an actor?

Lydia Higgman: I know.

Lydia Higgman: Thank you.

Susan Wokoma: Why are you doing this?

Lydia Higgman: I know, I know. Because I've been made to.

Susan Wokoma: You had an out.

Lydia Higgman: I know.

Rachel Lemon: But when she was telling me about it, it was so, like, the best thing about it was listening to her talk about it and talk her, like, grappling with the whole thing and going like. But we don't know what happens. And I was like, that is the magic thing is watching you trying to unpick this thing. And so for me, I was like, you've got to be in it. Lyds. And it was a bit of fun for Edinburgh. And now suddenly you found yourself performing

Rachel Lemon: At the royal court.

Lydia Higgman: its all a bit serious

Susan Wokoma: Now you're in.

Rachel Lemon: Yeah, but the one rule is I'm not allowed to make Lydia act. Lydia is only allowed to. So I trick her into acting.

Susan Wokoma: That's how.

Susan Wokoma: I mean, gosh. Okay, so we all have to book.

Susan Wokoma: This and watch now, so I could talk to you guys all day, but finally, what

does it mean to you to have your play here at the royal court?

Lydia Higgman: Oh, it's very surprising, to be honest.

Julia Grogan: It's amazing for me. it's very emotional because I worked on the bar here for three years.

Susan Wokoma: you have a relationship with this building

Susan Wokoma: Weren't you on one of the.

Julia Grogan: Yes, I've been on two of their groups. So I wrote my very first play, here, ah, on the introduction to playwriting course, while I was working on the bar. And, so to be having a play here, it's like, oh, my God, I literally used to sit and make cappuccinos-stand. Not sit and make cappuccinos, stand up and make Cappuccinos. And there's been. There's amazing creatives on the bar and we all just used to dream the whole time about having plays on here. So to be doing it with, like, my best mates is like absolute. Like absolute goosebumps. So, so excited. and it's pretty cool for you as well, rach?

Rachel Lemon: Pretty cool. I mean, it's just totally unbelievable. It's a bit like, I'm not sure it's definitely happening in That we're sat on this stage, but we are. This is real. It's happening. I feel like something's gonna break, break down, but, yeah, I mean, it's amazing. It's amazing. It's so cool.

Susan Wokoma: Thank you so much. Julia, Rachel, Lydia, thank you so much for joining us. And I can't wait to see the play.

Dirty Hare: Thank you.

Lydia Higgman: Cheers.

Susan Wokoma: Thanks for listening to the Royal Court Theatre Playwrights podcast. If you'd like to listen to more, then make sure you subscribe. If you're interested in what you've just heard, you can book tickets for this and other plays in the royal court's new season at the royalcourttheatre.com. Follow us at RoyalCourtTheatre on Instagram and @royalcourt on X. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Playwrights podcast. See you soon.

Susan Wokoma: Bye.