

S7 Ep2: Sabrina Ali

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Susan Wokoma: Hello, and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma. So, Sabrina Ali is a British Somali writer and actor who is driven by a passion for sharing authentic and representative stories. Sabrina's most recent play, *Dugsi Dayz* played at the Edinburgh Fringe 2023, to rave reviews. It was named a breakout hit of the festival by Rolling Stone Magazine. Get you. And, returned to the New Diorama last year. *Dugsi Dayz* will play in the Royal Court Theatre, Jerwood space upstairs this spring. Sabrina Ali, welcome to the Playwright's Podcast.

Sabrina Ali: Thank you.

Susan Wokoma: Now, I am going to ask everybody this. To begin with, what is your earliest memory of theatre?

Sabrina Ali: I'd, say probably primary school. I want to go see, like, a pantomime or something. So, yeah, it was, like, probably primary school. Like, during Christmas time, when you went to go see a pantomime, it was, like, very silly and stupid and fun. Like, I really enjoyed it.

Susan Wokoma: do you remember what the pantomime was? Was it, like, you know, I mean, there's only, like, probably five.

Sabrina Ali: It was like a Hansel and Gretel type riff off, but it was just so... I just

remember it being so silly and so stupid, and it was like, I remember finding it so funny. There was, like, adults and they were playing these wacky characters, and, like, it was hilarious. Like, I really enjoyed it. So that was my earliest memory.

Susan Wokoma: Comedy seems to be, like, in the heart of everything that you write. Do you think it stems from that first experience of having something so completely silly?

Sabrina Ali: Yeah, definitely. I think I enjoy comedy and, like, I've always enjoyed, like, making people laugh and stuff like that. And I was, like, the funny friend in, like, my friendship circle. So, I enjoyed, like, I think, storytelling and, like, I'd had. I had a way of, like, telling stories, but, like, it would be as simple as, like, I don't know, like, my journey to the shops to go get milk and I came across something.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sabrina Ali: But I enjoyed, like, seeing other people's reactions to, like, how I taught these stories and, like, having fun with it. So, yeah, I'd say comedy was something that followed me through, like, from since I was young up until, like, now.

Susan Wokoma: So a really natural storyteller without actually knowing that it was performance, that was just you.

Sabrina Ali: Yeah, I didn't realise at the time it was performance. And, like, I think when I wrote, my first one woman play, I was, like, really struggling because I was, like, I don't know, how this works. And I was looking at previous examples, and my friends was like, one of my close friends was like, you literally do that all the time. Like, it's just storytelling. And, like, if you watch, like, stand up comedians, which I never used to

watch, they're like, their whole entire bit is essentially one long, one woman play or one man play. So I realised I could have more fun with it and incorporate into theatre.

Susan Wokoma: Awesome.

Susan Wokoma: So how did you find theatre? What was the moment that you decided, okay, that's what I want to do? Was it Hansel and Gretel?

Sabrina Ali: No. I think I studied theatre in college, but I only did it because of acting. I only ever wanted to be an actor up until 2019, I'd say. So even in theatre studies, when we had to do the behind the camera work, or, like, not behind the camera work, but the writing and, like, making up character, I hated that part. I was like, just give me the script and I just want to perform. If it was like, a southern Belle, if it was like a, I don't know, martial arts, like, character, I just wanted to play all these fun characters and I guess theatre fun. Like, I ended up writing theatre and, like, writing, like, screenplays and stuff only cause I wanted to act. So I was, like, I was having, like, a lot of auditions and stuff that I was, like, really exhausted playing, like, a lot of similar characters and, like, tropes and homo stereotypes. I was always waiting for the perfect character, the perfect show. My friends were like, just write it. write the character you'd like to play. And when I did it, I realised how much fun I was having. I was like, this is actually really cool. And it's weird now, because now I feel like I enjoy writing way more than acting part. I can still perform in my writing and stuff. I could still enjoy acting, but I love writing now.

Susan Wokoma: Well, how did that overtake? How did the love of writing overtake acting then? Was it about writing that freed you or that you really loved?

Sabrina Ali: I think it's just, like, the creative control that you have over the characters

you're playing and knowing that you don't have to worry about, like, portraying any harmful stereotypes or tropes or connotations. And I think when I was acting, like, that was always at the back of my mind in terms of, like, has someone really taken care of this character? Are they really, like, rooting for this character? In terms of, is it just something where, like, it's almost like a tick box saying, like, oh, we have a character here for the diversity? And, like, I'd always ask these questions about the characters, and, like, when I go to auditions, I'd like... No one was really doing a lot of, like, research, or, like, care and love for the characters. So when I was writing, I knew that I was gonna, like, protect these characters the best way I could and I was gonna have fun with them as well. So, yeah, I realised, just as I was writing, I realised, oh, I really enjoyed it. This is so fun. And not only playing characters that I wrote, like, playing other, like, writing other characters as well was really fun.

Susan Wokoma: So that's really interesting that you found a kind of, would you say, like a relaxation when you write because you know, the intention behind the character. It isn't, we've got a tick box or Oh, I just fancy making this character, but I've done none of my research or, like, it's... It comes from you. So you know that it's a genuine, well thought out and fun part, because fun is so at the heart of your plays, is that you want your characters to. There's a freedom to a lot of them, even if they're very different in the plays. And that stems from the kind of freedom that you got from.

Sabrina Ali: Definitely. I just want them to have fun and, like, be their most authentic self without having to worry about, like, fitting into certain tropes and things like that. I think a, lot of the characters that I write now, they're a reflection on, like, the people in my life and, like, my shared experiences. And I think I wanted, especially with Dugsi Dayz I just wanted them to wear. They just happened to wear the hijab. But it's not, like, the centre of the storyline and things like that. So when I was writing these characters, I could

have so much fun with, like, the type of archetypes I could explore or, like, how crazy can I make them? How funny can I make them? Or weird I can make them without having to worry about all of this other stuff.

Susan Wokoma: So, yeah, so I want to talk about, because this happens a lot to me. My parents are Nigerians. Everyone's like, oh, you know, when you told your parents about wanting to become an actor, what was that like? So I've got to ask the very typical immigrant parent reaction to you saying, I want to be an actor now, I read that you said to your parents, do you want me to get an A in drama or a D in some other subject?

Sabrina Ali: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: That's ballsy. I would not have done that. [they laugh] So how was that conversation? Were they initially, quite scared or nervous or is it something that they're just like, no, that's what. That's what our girl's gonna do.

Sabrina Ali: I think that's when I was picking my a levels and I really loved drama GCSE and I did really well in it and I really wanted to do drama a level and, like, hopefully go to drama school. So I was like, next step is like, drama a level Because for GCSE they'll be like, okay, fair enough. You have ten options. Yeah, yeah, yeah. A level. There's four. And, like, they have to be core subjects. And I was like, okay, but can I do drama a level? And at first they were like, no, it has to be... They're like, why do you want to do drama a level if you don't want to study in university? I obviously had other plans. I was like, I'm gonna stop. This is gonna be. I'm gonna be an actor. But let me not tell them now. But yeah, initially they just accepted it. Cause I was like, this is just so I can get, like, an a or to get the a. I didn't do exactly the same. And they were like, fair enough. I was like, mom, universities don't care about that. They just look at As and she's like,

you're right. And then they let me do it. And then I went to university and I ended up studying law anyway. So I was like, ah. But yeah, they only accepted it cause they were like, at least they know I'm good at it and I'll get a good grade. But after that, though, like, when I graduate, when I finished 6th form, they're like, okay, let's get serious. Like, what are you going to apply for in university? Because I know it's not going to be drama. And I was like, okay, fair enough.

Susan Wokoma: So talk through the light bulb moment of I want to perform to your writing debut, which was your one woman show. So just talk us through that process because I know that you said that you were studying and you were having to do other aspects of theatre making, that you were like, now I want to perform. How did it come to right in your woman channel?

Sabrina Ali: I think I was in uni and I was in, like, my final year of law. And, like, I was still trying to do the whole acting thing, but I started falling more out of love of it. And, like, I was having, like, it made me realise why, like, my parents were so against it at the start because they were like, they don't ever, they don't ever see, like, muslim actors on screen, especially, evidently, like, hijabi wearing and, when they do, like, they often have to compromise something, right? And after, I was like, this is actually so true, because when you do go for these auditions and stuff like that, you're playing characters that don't feel right to you as well. And as a Muslim, you're already under such a microscope, and when you're a hijabi. So you have to be so careful how you treat these characters. We can't be afford to be written like Joffrey from Game of Thrones, for example, because there's not a lot of us on screen. So when we are on screen, you have to be careful how you portray us, because how we see ourselves and how others see us as well. And then I wrote.. SideYe approached me because they knew I was interested in writing. And I did a play with them the year before as an actress. And I did,

one woman show called one of those at all. And they just followed this wacky crime scene investigator. And she's accusing her friend of destroying her friend's wedding dress. But it was so fun playing her because she was, like, so crazy, so weird and fun. But I felt really free on stage. And as I was writing her, I was having so, so much fun. The year after, I was like, I want to write another play, but have an ensemble this time and have more characters I have fun with.

Susan Wokoma: Now, your debut, so it's called Mona knows it all. So you're very young, right? Have you heard of the show? Clarissa explains it all?

Sabrina Ali: No.

Susan Wokoma: Right. Okay.

Susan Wokoma: So Clarissa explains it all is... I did think, I was wondering whether you did, because your play that's going to be here at the Royal Court Dugsi Dayz is, inspired by the Breakfast Club, the eighties movie. Clarissa explains it all is a nineties sitcom. Some people know this. It is a nineties sitcom, which is about this young girl who's kind of, she's in this kind of family of wacky kind of people who don't really know what they're doing. And she's kind of the central gravitas of this, but she's extremely young. And just reading about your one woman show, it felt like there were similar themes in there. What is the, how have you sort of found, like with, particularly with breakfast club, how did you find that film and how did you go? Because I understand this, and I'm asking you these questions kind of out of context, because I feel like, as a woman of colour, you grow up watching so many things, and you have empathy for the characters and understanding, and you can see yourself into them, because if you don't, how does your imagination grow?

Susan Wokoma: It's kind.

Susan Wokoma: Kind of like out of a necessity.

Sabrina Ali: Exactly.

Susan Wokoma: So what was it about breakfast club that you watched? And you were like, I want to play in this.

Sabrina Ali: So I watched it when I was younger, and I thought it was so cool. Like, just like, I like the whole concept of, like, forcing people in a space or a room, whether it's like a elevator. I'm saying elevator, like America.

Susan Wokoma: [American accent] Like an elevator.

Sabrina Ali: [American accent] Like an elevator. Like, when you force people into lift, you have no, like, they would never, ever be seen with each other or, like, from completely different worlds, but in that moment, they are forced to interact with each other. And I like that with the breakfast club, so the different archetypes of high school students and everything. And I was like, okay, what's one thing that I'm constantly talking about? How it's frustrating as a young muslim girl, you can't really play different archetypes. You're always put in a box. But I'm like, when I look at my friends, young somali muslim friends, they're so different. And I have so many different friends who have all different personalities, different traits. So I was like, okay, with Dugsi Dayz I want to force four girls in a room, like, in detention or something, and, like, have to see how they interact with each other and, like, see how they can find some sort of common ground despite being so different. And the breakfast club does that so well. So I

thought, okay, let me do that for Dugsi Dayz. And I was like, but how.. will it be detention or will it be school? And I was like, Dugsi which is like an islamic madrasa, like almost a Sunday school, right? And I was like, that's something that brings back a lot of memories and is very nostalgic for a lot of us. And I was like, I had a lot of my funniest memories in Dugsi and some of my close friends I met through Dugsi and I thought that would be a perfect way. Like, Dugsi detention. They all go to Dugsi but they don't really hang out with each other in Dugsi. They know of each other, but the detention would be a perfect way to force them together.

Clip from the show: You've only been back a week and you've already got detention. Respect. Whatever you've done, you can tell me. You know, I've, probably already done it. Mind your business, rude. I'm just trying to make conversation. Did you forget your Quran homework? Did you pinch Sam's feet doing prayer? Did you eat Hairdos

Clip from the show: He doesn't like that.

Speaker C: Not Haribos did you carve your initials with my Alice walking stick and then hide it? And when he finds it, you're, like, well ahead of sort of stupid. Shut up. That is so haram. That is so haram. You cannot ignore your sister, especially when she salaams you. You didn't even salam me. Assalamu, sister. So, what, are you writing a book? Is it like death? He's actually not here. Yasmin. Sit down. Sit down. I can't believe I'm gonna be late to stay in our bridal shower. Wait, I swear your sister's already married. Obviously not my sister. My sister's best friend, Zeynab. Oh. So the one with the mole. No - the beauty spot. so her bridal shower starts at half eight, so if black timing is on my side, I should be good. Wait, isn't that the name of the girl you beat up outside the walls whenever I know it was you? Start that rumour Me? M. No, I don't think so.

Clip from the show: Oh, shoot.

Clip from the show: Not me.

Susan Wokoma: It's so wonderful, I have to say, because. And it's extremely clever because of exactly what you said. A lot of the times when you see muslim women, when you see muslim women who are visibly muslim, it's one type of character.

Sabrina Ali: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: And so now this is, like, it's such a gift, because you can have these girls who are so different.

Sabrina Ali: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: And you can. And, what I love is that you're not doing anything within the play that's going, oh, this is what this means. And this is what that is, like, get on the train.

Sabrina Ali: No, I love it. If you get it, you get it. And I was really worried about Edinburgh at Thursday when we were going up, because initially, I genuinely wrote Dugsi Dayz so my friends could laugh. Like, I knew my friends were writing it. I wasn't thinking about critics. We didn't realise how big it would get. But it was something that I knew my friends would show up and, like, something that I know that they would be able to watch the show and they'd be like, wait, is that me? And I'm like, what? And they're like, is that character me? Is that based on me? And I was like, yeah, I wrote it based on you. Because everything I write is, like, reflection of all the people in my life.

So when we went to Edinburgh, there's a lot of jokes and nuances. Dugsi Dayz obviously went over a lot of Edinburgh fringe crowd, like, over their head, and it didn't matter because I was like, when I was going to theatre shows when I was younger, there were so many plays that I probably would have not seen, super expensive or wasn't really of my interest at the time. But that's the whole point of theatre. You're supposed to immerse yourself into a world that's not your own. You're supposed to learn. And I was able to catch up and like, oh, my God. Okay, I guess I'm figuring out what's going on here, but, with Dugsi Dayz I really didn't want to compromise any of that because it is so specific for a specific audience, but it's inviting for everyone to come see it. And seeing, I think the highlight of it was definitely performing in front of school kids. I'd say they were the one critic that I was the most nervous for over anyone else because I was like, it's for them. So in Bristol Old Vic when we had a predominantly young muslim school of school kids come in for a school trip and seeing how they responded to it as the highlight, I'd say, of Dugsi Dayz. Because there were so many things and jokes that they were understanding. And at one point, I'd see these kids and they were laughing at one specific line about Tory Lanez or something, right? And they got the joke and the teacher turned around and they didn't get it. And I'd see the kids saying to the teacher, no, miss, do you not understand what she's chatting? It was so cool because I remember when I used to go to theatres, I say to my teacher, I don't get it. My teacher went, okay, Hamlet's got beef with this guy. This is what's happening. I didn't understand, but seeing it was like a full circle moment. I was like, there's kids explaining to their teachers what it's about. And they're like, oh, okay. But the teachers were happy that they were enjoying it.

Susan Wokoma: because people do. I think that people. I think that sometimes people can really misunderstand audiences comfort.

Sabrina Ali: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: What audiences want to feel is like they are able to watch a life unfold and feel that they can take part. And when something is written from a truth, I feel like it doesn't matter where that voice is coming from. And that's what I think that your play does amazingly. And also the success of your play, I think, is crucial because a lot of the times, a lot of people wouldn't programme this sort of play because will it sell tickets?

Sabrina Ali: Exactly.

Susan Wokoma: At, Rich Mix. So it was a two.. two show run. It sold out.

Sabrina Ali: Yeah, we did a two show run in October and then four shows in January, and it sold out. And, like, with new diorama, we sold out. I think we did three weeks there, I think. But there's a demand. Like, there's a demand for people want to see shows like this. And obviously, it is hard sometimes, like, having to always prove yourself and say, like, oh, like people want to see this, but I think there is a demand. And, like, seeing people come up to us and say that this is their first time going to theatre is crazy, because we all grew up in theatre, like, the cast and the producers and the directors. But a lot of people say that. For them to say that. My first ever theatre show was, like, Dugsi Dayz. Yeah. It's such an amazing feeling. Cause I would have loved that. Yeah. Yeah. Even though it was paduan was amazing.

Susan Wokoma: No. Sick. Yeah, that's a good first one.

Sabrina Ali: It feels good.

Susan Wokoma: So, okay, finally, what does it mean to have your play here at the Royal Court?

Sabrina Ali: It's super exciting. Like, we were talking about this back in Rich Mix. Imagine I'll play at the Royal Court. And, like, they have been so, so supportive from the early days of the scratch show. Like, Jane came to go see it, and it was like having someone from the Royal Court coming in to see a scratch show at the time felt a lot. And as a writer, I did an intro to playwriting group here, and I did, a writing group with sister pictures as well.

Susan Wokoma: You have a relationship with the building

Sabrina Ali: I have a relationship, and I think the Royal Court came into my life at the perfect time. And initially, it was such a daunting thing. I was like, the court? There's so much I don't know. I didn't feel like a proper playwright at the time, but they have always made me feel so safe and, like, so many questions I asked that were probably silly, that I should have probably known the answer to, but they really created an environment as a writer where I could ask them anything. So I'll forever be grateful to how much support they had given me as a writer. And when you look back now, it makes so much sense why they're like, they're for playwrights. The Royal Court It's a playwrights theatre. And it's like, they're super supportive. To have all that work I've done with them that I've incorporated into Dugsi Dayz is, like, every single time I'd go back to a script, like, oh, I learned this. I learned this today. So everything, like, I'm super, super thankful to them. So to have it here now, like almost a year later, is an amazing feeling.

Susan Wokoma: Sabrina, thank you so much for talking with me.

Sabrina Ali: Thank you so much.

Susan Wokoma: And I'm so excited to see the show. Thank you.

Susan Wokoma: Thanks for listening to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's 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 [ah, the royalcourttheatre.com](https://www.royalcourttheatre.com). Follow us @ RoyalCourtTheatre on instagram and @Royalcourt on X. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Playwright's podcast. See you soon.

Susan Wokoma: Bye.