

S7 Ep10: Emteaz Hussain

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Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma. And we have my guest today, Emteaz Hussain! Hello

Emteaz Hussain: Hi, Susan

Susan Wokoma: Thank you for joining me. Thank you. I'm just going to read your bio just so we know exactly who you are. You are a playwright and performance poet. As a performance poet, you have toured both nationally and internationally and toured as a backing poet with the late Benjamin Sefania's band. And as a writer, your work includes social distancing, etching, blood, sweet cider and writing as part of the Royal Court living newspaper. Your latest play, Expendable, will play in the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs later this year. Welcome to the Podcast. Thank you for joining me. Just, to kick off, could you tell me what is your earliest memory of Theatre?

Emteaz Hussain: Really?

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, let's do it.

Emteaz Hussain: Oh, wow. Oh my God.

Susan Wokoma: And I put you on spot now, haven't I?

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah, I know. it was a school. It was, going on a trip to see a panto with school. Yeah. And it was rubbish. And what was interesting, I've told this story before, I think, and what was interesting was I was kind of like the only asian girl around in my school and, well, I wasn't, but in that particular group, I remember just being quite on my own, a little bit isolated and Theatre wasn't something I was used to. but because it was so rubbish, we all kind of sort of bonded. It was like we all bonded in slagging it off. And so, yeah, that was great bonding experience. Theatre did that. [they laugh]

Susan Wokoma: Let's be honest, guys, it continues to do that. You know, when everyone's in the foyer afterwards, you've just seen a proper stinker and everyone's like

Susan Wokoma: We all agree that was bad

Emteaz Hussain: you know, it was good. It was good. It was good to go out and do that, you know, and have that experience. So. Yeah, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So how did you arrive?

Emteaz Hussain: That's going back years.

Susan Wokoma: How old were you roughly, do you think?

Emteaz Hussain: I think I was about 10?

Susan Wokoma: 10?

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: But it's so great because so early on, you're kind of figuring out, you're not being fooled, you're going, no, this isn't good enough. And you're sort of, figuring out.

Susan Wokoma: What your taste is.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah, actually, which is quite. Which is interesting because obviously we had nothing to compare it to.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah,

Emteaz Hussain: well, I didn't. I don't know if anyone else did.

Susan Wokoma: That's true.

Susan Wokoma: So, like, how did you know it was rubbish? What did they do wrong. So how did you arrive at writing and performance? What made you think, this is what I want to do? Was there a clear moment, or was that something that evolved over a long period of time?

Emteaz Hussain: It's interesting you say writing and performance because, we had drama lessons at school. Remember them? [they laugh] We had drama lessons.

Susan Wokoma: A faint memory of those. Oh, my God, it's so depressing. Yes, yeah.
[they laugh]

Emteaz Hussain: And, we had, we would do impro.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Emteaz Hussain: And so I really, me and my friends really got into it. We really got into impro and creating these dramas, and that was it. I kind of got this bug of performing and writing and creating, via drama lessons in school, because that was the way that I had access. And then I knew some of the older kids who were in the youth Theatre, the local youth, Theatre. So I kind of really fought to go there because it was so unusual for a young Pakistani girl in the eighties to want to do that. But that's what happened, and that's why I am a big advocate for arts in the schools, because if that we, you know, certain people,

Susan Wokoma: where do you get

Susan Wokoma: the first flush of the arts? I was exactly the same. It was school. Otherwise, what was it? What was that? That's kind of what Arnold Schwarzenegger does.

Emteaz Hussain: It became accessible that way. And it was good to do impro and create silly sketches and stuff that we were asked to do at that time. So, yeah, so that's what I started with. And then it developed into writing because I knew there wasn't, there wasn't anything saying that I wanted to say. So I started writing poetry. Right. How did I think to do that?

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, that's incredible that you went, you went from doing improv and then you went, okay, there's not anything that's kind of, that feels like my voice. I'm gonna write poetry.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Where did your love or interest in poetry come from?

Emteaz Hussain: Right. Yeah. So

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Emteaz Hussain: basically, at the youth Theatre, people were writing.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Emteaz Hussain: So that was inspiring. But also, I read poetry and I saw poets. I remember in the magazine, there was Jules punk poet at that time. So this is going back a long way. And I thought, oh, my God, that's so good. Yeah. And then I found a poem, you know, I found somebody who'd written a poem in somewhere, and I knew the person, and I don't think I was supposed to read it, but I thought it was beautiful. And I was off. I thought, if they can do that.

Susan Wokoma: So you know somebody who's written a poem, then you go, well, if that.

Susan Wokoma: Can happen,

Emteaz Hussain: yeah, if they do it, why can't I? And, sort of, you know, around the time in Sheffield where I grew up, we had the miner's strike and we had the anti- apartheid movement. I'm going back a bit here, but, there was lots of events and fundraisers and

so people were performing. So I got involved in that, the anti-apartheid movement and the antiracist struggles and the miners strike, and we were gigging and so, yeah, I could go on.

Susan Wokoma: This is exactly what we want. That's incredible. So, in terms of, like, just to concentrate on poetry before we move on. Like, for me, poet, this is me as a total punter, sort of outside looking in. For me, poetry is something that is such a delicate thing that is, you know, takes an immense knowledge of kind of structure and craft and what's come before you in order to kind of put pen to paper or start performing it. Did you ever feel that kind of anticipation into, you know, entering poetry? Or did it always feel accessible as soon as you knew that you knew that poet that you spoke of? And did you feel like you needed, there was a history that you needed to know about poetry before you began, or were you just in it?

Emteaz Hussain: Well, you're kind of made to write at school, aren't you? And sometimes you made to write poetry at school. [they laugh] I'm going back again to them early days. so rather than being told to write something, I started to just do my own, because I was inspired, obviously, by, what I read, and particularly somebody's personal poem. Okay. I could do that. So I just wrote, I didn't think too hard about craft.

Emteaz Hussain: Or I wasn't theoretical. It's instinctive.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Emteaz Hussain: So that's what I did. And some of it worked. it's harder, I think it's harder now for me than it was then.

Susan Wokoma: Really?

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah. Why? Because I think you're a little bit more fearless when you're younger and also, you don't. I didn't do it for like, an audience. I didn't think about an audience. Whereas now I'm very aware of audience and critiques and everybody, you know, seeing your work. And at that point, you know, it was innocent, slightly innocent. I didn't, you know, and I was too angry as well.

Susan Wokoma: Right? Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I guess. Yeah. When you have that kind of impetus to speak, and if you're gigging and you're a part of like the anti-apartheid movement and Sheffield and antiracism, there's like another impetus that isn't just going, how does the audience feel? It's going, this is what you have to say, I guess.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah. And also, you know, there were poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jene 'Binta' Breeze, Benjamin Zephaniah around you know, so they're inspiring.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Emteaz Hussain: You know, so you just, oh, what they do, they can do it, I can do it kind of thing.

Susan Wokoma: Okay, so you've also, as well as writing Theatre, you've written for television. You've written on the television show Ackerley Bridge on Channel Four. So how was your experience? because your writing, definitely the genesis of it was so instinctual, like it was to do with your instinct. How do you go from that to writing something that is structured, established, it has its own voice, rhythm. How was that

leap, if it was a leap for you?

Emteaz Hussain: Well, I loved the show, so I was really delighted to be asked into the writers room. and so, well, I was very aware that it was going to be different. So there was no surprises. I thought, this is going to be different. It's a format and I've got to hit these deadlines and luckily I'd written plays and done a few things. So, I was kind of okay as a jobbing writer. Let me see. But I enjoyed being able to contribute. That's the thing. I was able to contribute to the story and help create the characters. That's what the writers room is for. And I love the discipline of it, actually.

Susan Wokoma: Right. Yeah. Okay.

Emteaz Hussain: Sort of like this deadline. This time you've got to do this, this time

Susan Wokoma: We've got to shoot on this day.

Emteaz Hussain: You've got to have it sorted. So that's good.

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Emteaz Hussain: you know, whereas in Theatre it can just go on for a while. Yeah. That was kind of a good experience. Yeah. And working collectively, you know, you're with a team.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Emteaz Hussain: And collaboratively, you know, once it gets on set and people start, I

mean, you're not part of it, but you feel it's like a bigger machine.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So let's talk about your play *Expendable*, which is about the Rotherham grooming scandal. What made you decide to explore this subject? And had you been unsatisfied, with how it's been explored before, what was the impetus to say, I want to write about this?

Emteaz Hussain: Okay. It wasn't specifically the Rotherham grooming scandal. It was, the grooming scandals that really hit the small towns and various towns up north.

Susan Wokoma: Got you. Okay

Emteaz Hussain: What was the impetus? Was the question.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. Why did you want to write it?

Emteaz Hussain: Because I was just frustrated by the media narrative. You know, it seemed incredibly oversimplified. And I'm from those towns, and I, knew it was a lot more nuanced and complex. And frustratingly, there was no women's voice, Asian women's voices, or Pakistani women's voices. And, being from there and the conversations we were all having, my peers and, you know, families and stuff, I'm right at the heart of it. And yet we were kind of erased out of the bigger narrative. the Muslim women's network did a report, I think it was 2014. Yes, 2014. called unheard voices in

response to that erasure. And that was brilliant, harrowing report, but brilliant report. And I was also inspired by that to work with that kind of material. And the erasure and silencing of women at the heart of this experience. and how what was being said was impacting.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. so Expendable is incredibly nuanced. That's what it offers. We have the character of Yasmin, who returns to Forestdale to see the impact of crewman gangs. And her sister Zara is, directly associated with one of the ringleaders because he's decorating her home. So it's right in there. And it's about community and complicity, family, racism. How has it been. Because, like you said, it's about the grooming scandals, not any particular one. How has it been writing something that is so fresh in our memory, in history? Or do you not feel, because of the way it's been reported on, that actually, it hasn't. There is no freshness to it because we don't know this side of the story.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah, that's it. It's, a side of the story that needs to be told, I think. And the thing about Zara and, the perpetrators decorating her house, she's not aware, and so suddenly she's kind of implicated.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah - complicity - just by association, which I think is a lot.

Emteaz Hussain: Just by association - yeah. And then how that has a massive impact on her. That's an important story to tell. Why are people, by association, guilty when they don't know?

Susan Wokoma: Also, it's like the grouping of people, I feel, like, responsibility of having to represent.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Like what? Like how if somebody in your ethnic group behaves in a certain way, therefore you must have known. And it's just like.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: How.

Emteaz Hussain: How is that all that complexity and nuance around that? And, Yeah, it's a big, big, big subject matter.

Susan Wokoma: M. Yeah, no, it is, it is. And what do you, do you think about the. Let's talk specifically with Expendable. Did you think about your audience experience of watching this play? Did you feel like you had, a responsibility or was it very much, I'm going to tell the story and you can sort of take it however you. You want. Where. How did the audience play into the writing?

Emteaz Hussain: Oh, it's. Yeah, it's an interesting one that, I have to just think about writing the characters and how they're being affected. And, if I really focused on the audience, I don't, you know, I think I wouldn't be able to write so well. because you have to create these three dimensional characters who have an experience. I tried to stick as honestly as I could with that. but, yeah, you do. I constantly think about how this is.

Emteaz Hussain: Going to impact,

Susan Wokoma: but you try not to let that impede

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Susan Wokoma: in the process of writing because you want those characters to be as nuanced as possible.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah. And to tell the story as honestly, as unflinchingly. Yes, I can. That's the word.

Susan Wokoma: Unflinching.

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, that is it, isn't it? so what... you were. Okay, you were specifically commissioned by the Royal Court to go to write this play, weren't you? And then you obviously had the relationship with the Royal Court, with the living newspaper. How has it been working with the Royal Court on this process? You can be as honest as you like, but how has it been with the Royal Court?

Emteaz Hussain: It's been, Well, the process itself has been quite a while because, we've had a pandemic.

Susan Wokoma: Yes. Okay. So when were you commissioned?

Emteaz Hussain: Around 2016.

Susan Wokoma: Oh, wow, okay. Yeah, right, 2016. And how come it's taken? I mean, we've had writers on here who've literally talked about it taken seven years to write a

play. So it's not that it's unusual. I'm not going, why is it taking so long? Why do you think it's taken this long minus a pandemic?

Emteaz Hussain: I think what I will say is that, when I first got commissioned, the fallout was still happening. And so in some ways, the reality seemed bigger than the play for me. so I was kind of, you know, we were. People were.. the day to day lives and surviving and stuff, and there was disclosures and there was, you know, I was doing research and it was, It was very real and alive and I was in it. Yeah. So that seemed more important than just the play at that point. It took time for me to start, to actually start crafting what I needed to craft, really, because I felt so, involved in various ways. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So you needed, I guess a distance

Susan Wokoma: really. Do you think?

Emteaz Hussain: eventually. Yeah, I think the distance did help. Yeah. Actually, to get down to it. so, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: What do you hope audiences will take away? If you want to think about, if you don't want to think about them, you don't need to open this box. But what do you hope audiences will take away from the play?

Emteaz Hussain: I hope they will understand how, that media juggernaut impacted on a community. And, it's a very complex play, isn't it? So I just hope each and every person takes something, but I just hope they become aware of how this impacted on this specific family I've written about, really, because it just had a massive, it has a massive

impact on this fictional family, but I know it did on communities because, you know, there was the EDL and BMP marching every other week. And so I think that's what people don't know, and I think that's what people need to know, I guess.

Susan Wokoma: So, finally, how does it feel to have your play on at the Royal Court? What does it mean to you, if anything? If it doesn't mean anything, that's fine. But, like, what's it mean in this, in this space that is, you know, geared and focused on playwrights?

Emteaz Hussain: Yeah, well, it's an iconic place, isn't it, for writing? And I've got, you know, I love so many plays. I mean, we're sat here where road was on and where, you know, what did a series put in the corner and all these random, you know, these great - blasted - and all these fantastic places. Wonderful to just be in part of that kind of history. so that's great, you know. and then obviously there's life outside of the Court. I'm very fortunate to have had plays come through to Marsha and tour and stuff. So, you know, I think it's important to also remember the other work that goes on outside,

Susan Wokoma: Of course. Emteaz, thank you so much for joining me. Thank you. It's been a pleasure to speak with you.

Emteaz Hussain: You are very welcome. thank you for having me, Susan

Emteaz Hussain: Yes, I'm a bit starstruck.

Susan Wokoma: No, stop it. No need. No need. 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

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Susan Wokoma: Bye.

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