

S7 Ep7: Tife Kusoro talks to Susan Wokoma

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The following episode may contain strong language.

Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma, and my guest today, Tife Kusoro

Tife Kusoro: Hello. Hi.

Susan Wokoma: It's so good to see you.

Tife Kusoro: You too.

Susan Wokoma: Join us.

Tife Kusoro: You too.

Susan Wokoma: So you are a writer, performer whose work has previously been shortlisted for the Alfred Fagorn award, the Verity Bargate award and the women's prize for playwriting. Tife's play, G, was developed whilst on attachment with the Royal Court Theatre and it will debut in the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs later this year. Welcome to the Podcast. Thank you.

Tife Kusoro: Thank you for having me.

Susan Wokoma: Okay, so what was your earliest memory of Theatre?

Tife Kusoro: Oh, wow. My earliest memory of Theatre was, So I grew up in Nigeria until I was ten, and I remember going to the Theatre once while living there. and it was with my whole family and we went to watch this play. I think it must have been by Wole Soyinka. And, yeah, it just felt really, like, magical and I didn't really know what was going on. I think I was too young to really know what was going on, but I think, yeah, it just felt so magical and like, so alive. And, I think that's my earliest memory of Theatre.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, that's incredible because I was born here in the UK. My parents are Nigerian, but my first experience of Theatre, was white people. Like, that would have been my absolute. It was Bugsy Malone, actually. It was kids, though, and I remember sort of going, 'why are the kids on stage?' And I felt really strange for days afterwards. And it was because I was going, I want to be the kids. Took me years to work out, but that's. That's an amazing. Just as a British Nigerian. Amazing first experience. Now I normally talk about the playwrights relationship with the Royal Court to go towards the end, but your relationship with the Royal Court to go is so extensive that we have to jump in. So I'm just gonna read out your relationship. So you were part of the Royal Court to go introduction to playwriting group and that's where you wrote G. you were awarded the Lynn Gagliano award, which is named after the former head of education here, which is a year long attachment to work on writing and participation work, including writing a play for an SW1 school project. You also wrote a letter as part of Rachel Delahaye. We love her, my white best friend and other stories left unsaid, as well as a living newspaper at the Royal Court. Now that's incredible. How did you find the royal Court. Like, how did that, when did that relationship start? Because that's a lot to fit in. And, my dear, you're young. So when did that happen?

Tife Kusoro: actually it started off, while I was at uni, when I started writing, when I started writing plays, I was always looking for opportunities to submit to things and try

and somehow push my work into the world in some way. and I read about the Royal Court to go and that they had open submissions window. So I just submitted the first play I ever wrote to them, or to here, and it got rejected and I was like, oh, man,

Susan Wokoma: [talking to Royal Court] you don't know nothing you lot [they laugh]

Tife Kusoro: but now I can have that and be like, okay, but now I'm here. but yeah, it got rejected, but they were like, keep in touch and send more stuff. And so, a year later, I sent another play and that was how I got through to the, introduction, to playwriting group. yeah. And so, yeah, I think I always just saw this place as, like, the beacon of new writing and always wanted to, I don't know, like, find my way in, in some way. And I feel really grateful that my, work has sort of, like, wormed its way in and is now, like, going to be on stage here, which is crazy. So crazy. But, yeah, it's amazing.

Susan Wokoma: And what were the. I mean, there must have been such a. Because your experience has been so extensive, but, like, what do you think are the main things that you took away from the playwriting group and from the attachment that you had here for a year? What were the main things?

Tife Kusoro: I would say definitely. I feel like it strengthened a lot of, like, the, like, structural things about my writing in terms of learning practical things about, structure and character, but also like, getting to know other playwrights as well that were at the same stage, of writing. and with the Lynn Gagliona award, that was the first time I ever got to work with young people and write in that way. And it was very new. but it definitely taught me so much. And, yeah, like, expanded how I think about, Theatre, definitely. So, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So you graduated from University of Leeds.

Tife Kusoro: Yes. With a degree in english literature.

Susan Wokoma: And then you trained as an actor with the National Youth Theatre

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Susan Wokoma: rep company. Yeah, I'm former NYT as well.

Tife Kusoro: Oh, yay

Susan Wokoma: But the rep company didn't exist. It was just, you did shows every summer, if you were lucky. so how did that experience of the rep? Because I've been a mentor for the rep, so I understand what, what it requires of you. How was that experience because you're not just a writer, you're a performer as well. So talk me through that experience.

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, I've always wanted to do writing and acting at the same time. Like, when I first started writing, the first play I wrote, I wrote because I wanted to perform something and I was like, okay, this seems like a way. And it actually crazily, I was inspired because I watched chewing gum on channel four, which you were obviously in. So this feels like a, like, weird.

Susan Wokoma: Like also in the Theatre that you're gonna be performing your play.

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, I felt really inspired by that. and like, the first play I wrote, I like,

wanted to write something that felt like my own voice and felt like a character that I could play. so I feel like I've always tried to hold both writing and acting, at the same time. And with doing national youth Theatre rep, I feel like that really, for the time that I did it really built a lot of my confidence and a lot of the community that I felt like I, previous to that, didn't have as an actor. I feel like it gave me a lot of that and, yeah, yeah, it's definitely how, my acting career properly started. And now I feel like I can call myself an actor as well as a writer. but, yeah,

Susan Wokoma: so for people who.

Susan Wokoma: Don'T, because I've just sort of jumped the gun a bit because I know exactly what the rep company, if you can explain what the rep company is - like how long is it? What does it involve?

Tife Kusoro: So the national Youth Theatre rep company is, a programme run by the national Youth Theatre, that is about a year long. And it takes, about ten to 15, young actors. And, sort of it's like a training programme, like an alternative to drama school training, that focuses on, getting shows on, and getting people, getting young actors to actually experience, the industry in a sort of like really hands on way by actually making a show and performing and stuff like that. so, yeah, that's what it is. And it really. Yeah, it was a really, really fun experience. Very intense, but also, like, really helped me a lot, I think.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, I mean, I went to drama school for three years. The idea of sort of truncating that.

Susan Wokoma: Into one - it was very intense.

Susan Wokoma: But in a way, you sort of, you cut out the fat because now you're just focusing on those very practical skills of the doing of it. Whereas at drama school there can be so much theory.

Tife Kusoro: Yeah,

Susan Wokoma: Too much theory, I think, where you're just sort of talking yourself into a role, and then when you have to play it, you've got no tools. So it's amazing that there's that alternative. So on your website, which is very handy. Thank you for creating a website. Can everybody create a website, please? It's brilliant. Yes, we love it. So, on a website, you say, I'm drawn to work that is moving, imaginative and surreal. My work currently explores black womanhood, community, and coming of age. Did you always know that that's what you wanted to focus on straight out the gate when you started writing?

Tife Kusoro: No. No, I didn't. I feel like over the years, it's been a bit of, like, an experimentation of just writing whatever I feel or whatever I think about most. And for some reason, these are the things that just, like, always came up naturally. So it wasn't like I. I didn't know right off the bat that this is what I wanted to do, but I think naturally it just sort of. Yeah, these themes just always sort of fall into my writing. I always love writing characters that are in a sort of, like, late teenage, early twenties stage, because, because when I started writing, it feels like that was where I was. But also. Yeah, that just. It feels like such a stage of life that can, like, hold so many stories and so many feelings that I just love going back there. And I always write about black womanhood, even though G isn't about black.

Tife Kusoro: womanhood.

Susan Wokoma: I know! I was about to come onto that!

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, G is like, yeah, G is not about black womanhood. but, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So, how have you found the balance between writing and. We will talk more about G in a moment, but, have you found the balance between writing and performing? I feel often, that with a lot of black writer performers, there's something about the visibility that's really important, I think. and even not just performers, but writer producers, there is something about, like, not being erased from your work. Did that have an, Was that anything to do with your decision to want to do both, or was it just the love of enjoying both?

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, I think it started off with just a love of enjoying both of those things and wanting to be able to, like, hold both of those things. But, now it feels more like I'm finding a lot of, like, agency and a lot of, Just, like, a lot of confidence in being able to, like, be like, this is my voice, and this is what I want to write. And I can also, like,

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Tife Kusoro: put myself in it as a performer. that feels like something I have control over where sometimes with acting, it feels like I. It feels like you can lack control and you have to, like, rely on, external circumstances a lot. but it feels like a privilege to be able to write and to be able to say that actually I can. Yeah, you can create a space for yourself where otherwise no one else is creating space for you, or no one else is gonna. Yeah, no one else is gonna give you a voice. There's space for you to do that yourself. And I find a lot of comfort in that. as an actor and a writer.

Susan Wokoma: yeah, you know, I had an, experience when I decided that I wanted to direct. And I had a producer. This, is a piece that I've written, and I had a producer say, why do you want to direct? Is it just because you want power?

Susan Wokoma: I remember being so upset at that, that notion of power. I spoke to another director friend of mine who said, well, why? What's wrong with you having power over your own work? And I think that is something that I actually think a lot of women, regardless of their race, we struggle with. It's like, oh, do I want to write the theme tune, sing the theme tune and all of that. And actually centering yourself is something that if you don't do it, particularly as.

Susan Wokoma: A black woman,

Tife Kusoro: no one else is going to do it.

Susan Wokoma: So kudos to you. Now, let's talk about G

Susan Wokoma: G is a story of three black boys trying to avoid trouble and get through school amidst the looming threat of Baitface the Gully man. Urban legend has it that Baitface steals the faces and lives of black boys. When the spirit is triggered and their lives, identities and friendships begin to disintegrate, the boys must question what it really means to be seen. So, first question, why is it about boys? Thought it was about black women? What? [laughter]

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: No - that's not a criticism. It's interesting.

Tife Kusoro: No - that's valid- I actually wrote it, initially because I have, a younger brother and I wanted to write something that I felt like he would enjoy and he would see himself in. And he's also not the kind of person that would ever, off his own back, go to the Theatre. And he doesn't really read any of my work. He's not really that interested.

Susan Wokoma: So this is a whole operation just

Susan Wokoma: to get your brother into theatre [they laugh]

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, but actually, yeah, it started off as that and wanting to sort of like, write something that felt like I could maybe tap into his perspective a little bit and into the perspective of other black boys or people like him, just from like an observational way. but yeah, that was where it started off.

Tife Kusoro: Yeah. Yeah, I was just very interested in exploring it because I think up to writing G I had always. The things I'd written always seemed to be from my direct experience. It felt like they were, from my direct voice or that I could put myself into the shoes of those characters. And it was a version of me in a way, but with G, it felt like I was trying to go away from that a little bit or just try and start to,

Susan Wokoma: it feels like that. So there's been a bit more of a journey towards something that you may not fully understand. black boyhood, really. And that's exciting because that keeps you. When you're. When you challenge yourself, that keeps you challenged, basically, rather than just writing what you know, which

Susan Wokoma: is exciting. So let's talk about the friendship between the boys in this play. So what was it that you wanted to reveal about these three boys in that way?

Tife Kusoro: I think for me, in the play, the friendship between the three of them is the thing that felt most important and, most interesting. and also most joyful, I think. Even though the play is, about quite difficult themes and can come across as quite dark, at times, I feel like I really wanted to maintain the feeling of, like, playfulness and joy. And that came from the three characters and their relationships with each other and the ways that they love each other and the ways that they also sometimes hate each other and the ways that they see each other when it seems like the world around them doesn't see them. yeah. So I think that's. That's what I wanted to bring out of their friendship. That feeling of, well, when nobody else. When it feels like no one else is seeing you, no one else is, making space for you. How did they do that for each other? And how can they find that in each other? And it's. It's a journey towards them finding that, like, it's not. They're not in, like, a perfect friendship from the start, but they find it eventually, and they. Yeah, they work towards that, or they work that out with each

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Tife Kusoro: other.

Susan Wokoma: It's interesting what you say about, like, them seeing each other, because the idea of surveillance is something that is integral, definitely part of this story. So the play takes place in two states, one and zero. Zero is inside the clip of CCTV. I mean, I do. I'm allowed to say that that's what was in the notes. So I was like, well, I guess I can say that. Try not to reveal much about the play. But, that's incredible. So what made you want to look at surveillance and how people are seen and how black men or black boys, that's been clear with that boys?

Tife Kusoro: yeah, this also was like from conversations that I would have with my

brother even before, starting this play, just about, I guess, the way he felt like he was seen by the world and who he actually was within himself versus who other people perceived him to be and how those two things were just so far away from each other in a way that sometimes he didn't really understand. And me, as a person that has always known him, also kind of didn't understand of like, how can the world see you as this like scary thing when I know you as somebody that is so loving and so tender and so kind and has so many more levels? And I think I wanted to, with the play, like, explore that binary of like, who are these boys truly versus who does the outside world see them as? When you take a sort of 2D vision of a CCTV clip?

Susan Wokoma: it's fascinating.

Susan Wokoma: And also this idea of like hyper visibility, but also invisibility because you're being seen in a way that isn't true. So you're not being seen. Such a weird state to operate in. And so let's talk a little bit, without any spoilers, The character of Baitface described, as a God or a ghost or a trick of light, illusion, reality. So can you expand a bit more, as much as you can, about a bit more about the character Baitface?

Tife Kusoro: Baitface, without trying to spoil anything, Baitface is this sort of like looming, sort of urban legend that exists in the world of the play and the world of these boys, where people believe that, if a black boy walks under a pair of hanging trainers without covering his face, then sort of bad stuff, like mysterious things, start happening. I think with Baitface I sort of wanted to create a sense of like, the fear that these characters sort of like are forced to move through the world with unfairly and that feeling of just always having to watch your back or always having to be careful where you step, which is such an intense way to exist in the world and is so unsettling. and I wanted to create that with Baitface but also have a sense that like you, he's a character that is

also kind of alive in the play and that you can also discover more about as the story goes on. And he isn't, he may not entirely be what you expect him to be.

Susan Wokoma: it's a great way of going around that [they laugh at the lack of spoilers] I really respect the way you've done that.

Susan Wokoma: Really impressed. I was like, the knots of that... It's fantastic. So what are some of the influences for this play? Like, what, in terms of your writing process, what were the things that, helped you, inspired you?

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, so I was.

Susan Wokoma: I know you spoke about your brother. Sorry. But was there anything else in terms of, like, the style?

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, there was. I was really heavily inspired by a play called Passover, by a writer called Antoinette Nwandu. and, when I initially saw that play, I had a very, like, visceral reaction to it, and it wasn't necessarily a positive reaction, but it was a very, like, present, very, like, I couldn't stop thinking about it for, like, weeks, and it, like, sort of, something sort of, like, kept bubbling in me. That was specifically to do with that play. But I think what really struck me was, like, the surreal world that she created. Just so, so, like, I don't know how to describe it, but I think I drew a lot from the, sort of, like, darkness of that world and the strangeness of that world. I think to create the world of G. because I think I'd never at that point, seen anything like it, and it just felt so dynamic. And the way that she uses language is so incredible. and, yeah, I definitely. Yeah, I definitely drew a lot from that.

Susan Wokoma: And so, just to round up, final two questions, what do you hope audiences take away from seeing G and what does it mean to have your play on at the Royal Court?

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Susan Wokoma: So we'll start with, what do you want audiences to take away?

Tife Kusoro: I hope that audiences from seeing G, maybe see the world in a slightly different way, or. I don't know. Actually, that's a hard question.

Susan Wokoma: But you know what? Actually, sometimes it isn't. Some writers are like, it's not my business. You write the story, you present the story, and people sort of take that away, and that is completely.

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, I don't know. But I know that I hope that they enjoy being with the characters. I know that I hope that they find, the characters to be as alive and as fascinating as I did while writing. yeah, so that's what I'll say.

Susan Wokoma: and what does it mean to have your play on at the Royal Court?

Tife Kusoro: Yeah, it's amazing. Like, yeah, I'm, like, stuttering. I'm like, can't believe it. yeah, it's so cool. it means a lot, I think, because when I started writing, I submitted and felt like, oh, God, how could they reject me? I love them. And now it feels like things have sort of come full circle. but I. Yeah, I feel really excited and really grateful to have the opportunity to share work on a stage like this because, yeah, I've always wanted to.

Susan Wokoma: Amazing Tife. Thank you so much. And I cannot wait to see G. Thank you so much for speaking with me.

Tife Kusoro: Thank you.

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