

S8 Ep1: Sutara Gayle AKA Lorna Gee talks to Susan Wokoma

Royal Court: You are listening to a podcast from the Royal Court Court Theatre. Please note 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 for this episode, Sutara Gayle. Pleasure to be with you here.

Sutara Gayle: Thank you.

Susan Wokoma: The Royal Court Court in our little bookshop.

Sutara Gayle: Oh, very nice.

Susan Wokoma: So thank you so much for sitting down with me. I'm just going to do, a little intro just for people who might not be aware of your amazing work. They will be aware when they come and see your show here at the Royal Court. So Sutara Gayle is a writer and performer, also known as the award- winning South London reggae artist Lorna Gee. Sutara began her musical career as Lorna Gee in the late 70s and was a pioneering. Is a pioneering female presence in the male dominated reggae scene. After training in acting at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art, Sutara has also gone on to have an illustrious acting career both on stage and screen, including several appearances here at the Royal Court, including Sugar Mummies and Blessed Be the Tie. Last year her one woman play, The Legends of Them played a, highly acclaimed run at the Brixton House, produced by the Hackney Showroom. And this Christmas it

will have a run in the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs. [they both cheer] Come on. Pleasure to have you here. Okay, so I'm going to start with, the question I ask absolutely everybody. What was your earliest memory of theatre?

Sutara Gayle: My earliest, memory of theatre. Let me think now. Well, the one that really, really sticks out in my mind is actually when I was at drama school.

Susan Wokoma: Ok.

Sutara Gayle: And I went to, The Globe

Susan Wokoma: Ah, right, cool.

Sutara Gayle: And watched Twelfth Night.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: And I can't remember Mark. Mark Ryland.

Susan Wokoma: Mark Ryland!

Sutara Gayle: was playing Olivier.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Sutara Gayle: and I remember watching that man kind of float, glide.

Susan Wokoma: Oh, yeah, I saw it. Yes.

Sutara Gayle: Oh my God. And actually it blew my mind. And, and I actually went backstage and wrote a whole letter to him. I don't think he'd remember me. I was just so [gasps to indicate awe] I wrote this whole letter, just saying how much, you know, you've really inspired me and to watch you do this performance, you know, I didn't know that much, about Shakespeare, but watching this performance just, it literally just blew my mind. And I'd never seen something come to life as much as I'd seen. So that's actually like my really first prominent memory of theatre theatre.

Susan Wokoma: That is amazing. I remember, yeah, very sort of transcendent, gliding. It was an amazing performance

Sutara Gayle: Seriously, seriously. And you know, it was just punching, punching, punching. And you know, yeah, it was.. everything about the colour and the costumes? Because I do love a costume.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, we're going to talk about. We're going to talk about your style.

Sutara Gayle: [Sutara cheers] Come on now. [Susan laughs]

Susan Wokoma: We cannot not have a conversation.

Sutara Gayle: It really made an impression on me. It really made an impression on me. As I said, I wrote a long, big, old, long two page letter to him and put it backstage. Whether you read it or not, I don't know.

Susan Wokoma: Wow.

Susan Wokoma: But if Mark Rylance is watching or listening to this, you've got to come to Lorna's show.

Sutara Gayle: I hope you see it.

Susan Wokoma: so you started out as a musician in reggae, so talk to me about that journey. I know that you're born in Brixton, raised in Brixton. So, like, how did you discover music? Was that just all around you? Like, how was it encouraged? Was it just something that felt kind, of intrinsic to you? Let's talk about that journey.

Sutara Gayle: Music has always been a part of my life. All my brothers and sisters played music. My brother twins were, One of my twin brothers were, He was a pianist.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: The other one was a violinist. and they played in church, you know. so that's how we grew up, listening to, hearing music in church. We always had a piano at home. You know, my mum played a bit of the piano and she was always strumming, you know what I mean, singing off key. But music was a part of, you know, growing up. And my brothers played a lot of music on the blues spot ground. They had their own little collection of reggae music. So that's really where I started hearing reggae. And then as a youngster, getting used to going to the blues dances.

Susan Wokoma: Yesss

Sutara Gayle: I started very early.

Susan Wokoma: Oh, how early?

Sutara Gayle: Darling,

Susan Wokoma: darling,

Sutara Gayle: [Sutara whispers] thirteen [Susan gasps in shock] thirteen [they both laugh] shush! coz if any of my grandchildren ever think, yeah, they're gonna

00:05:00

Sutara Gayle: start going out at 13, trust me, it can't happen. Right. [Susan is laughing] Oh. So, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Thirteen. I went, I remember the first dance that I went to was called a Blue Lagoon, also known as Cons on Railton Road on the Front line.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: And, I went there with my friend and I walked in this. Listen and I walked into this place where it was. You go downstairs and it was just one way in and one way out.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: And it was dark and all I remember is the bass It almost lifted me off the

floor, you know, it was just like. And I was like. At first I couldn't, It was going all through my body and I thought, oh, my God, I have to leave. I can't take this. But then. Do you understand it was just so wrong. I was looking around thinking, how can people be standing up and raving and this bass is not, you know, I mean, penetrating them, like.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sutara Gayle: And then after a while, you know, I mean, you just become one with it.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: The bass and you just become one. And that was it. I was sold for life.

Susan Wokoma: Ah.

Sutara Gayle: Yeah. that's how I got into real music and felt, felt, felt, you know, fell in love and really, started going to many dances after that. And that's where I started going on the mic.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Sutara Gayle: That's where it was for me.

Susan Wokoma: from there

Sutara Gayle: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: It's so. That's. It's so beautiful the way that you describe that. Because actually, weirdly, it's so beautiful the way that you describe that experience of 13. Because it feels like. I've got an order of questions now. And now I'm going to throw away my order because this is so fascinating. It. That description feels like the best of theatrical experiences, actually. When it's a physical kind of a feeling where you. So you're sort of fighting with it. You can't look, but you can look, but you want to be there, but you can't be there. Then you get sucked in. It's. It's. So even though you picked, Twelfth Night as your first theatrical experience, there's something about the merging of music and live music that is theatrical.

Sutara Gayle: Absolutely. And also, it's not just the music, it's the people and the energies and the outfits. You know, I mean, you. You just. Those times, people really had a real passion of. Of dressing. Everybody was trying to outdress everybody else. So you, you know, And that was. You were surrounded by these beautiful women with, you know, their hair and their beautiful clothes and their jewellery and. And I was just like, wow. Yeah, that's what I want to be. Do you know what I'm saying? You know, the men out of their suits and, you know what I mean, their gold tip shoes and their crocodile skin shoes, you know, and their farahs and their slacks and their Cecil G. I mean, this was a time where, you know, and then they had their sovereign rings and their chaparita. You know what I mean? Listen, man, that was Theatre. It was my Theatre. That was my first really impression of beauty,

Susan Wokoma: of beauty.

Sutara Gayle: Beauty. And from a very early age, my spirit has been led by, aliveness, just aliveness, whatever the circumstances, just as long as it's got energy and it's alive and it's fresh and it's colourful and it's Beautiful. I've always been, turned on by that.

Sutara Gayle: You know what I mean?

Sutara Gayle: so when I used to see that, it was that I was home.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah,

Sutara Gayle: I felt like I was home. As a juxtaposition. Juxtaposition is that, you know, at home I was, a part of a very religious, household. Seventh Day Adventist. Very, very strict Seventh Day Adventist. And you know, you know, Fridays and Saturdays, there's no, there's no messing around. You know, you Friday yeah, you better be reading your Bible and nothing else. So for me to be, on the other end of it, just like raving to the music, it was like, wow.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, there's such a freedom in that.

Sutara Gayle: Such a freedom. It was such a freedom.

Susan Wokoma: Which is so. It's so interesting because I've watched a recording of the Legends of Them and I feel exactly that that is what you evoke in the space. And it's something that isn't just kind of begins with you and ends there. It's an invitation of. The audience feels, you know, riotous and deep and like transformative in a way that, you know, kind of proscenium arch you know, actors are there, audience are there isn't. Which is so beautiful, so clear. So in terms of your music and what you write, would you say that you're inspired by deeply personal things? The world around you, what you like? How would you say, your observations of music, how do you approach

Sutara Gayle: Just how

00:10:00

Sutara Gayle: I live, Just how I live. There's no different from what I see and what I experience and, you know, what I see on a deeper level and what's outside there in the world. Yeah, that's. That's what I write about. You know, and I'm Since the bit. Since the very beginning when I wrote my first record, it was a personal experience that had happened to me. The three week Ghana. Me. Gyro Nakom.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Sutara Gayle: Actually waiting for my Gyro

Susan Wokoma: Gyro. Yes, yes!

Sutara Gayle: So I wrote about that, but moving, on to that. All of the songs that I wrote were experiences that I'd seen, even if it didn't happen to me, I saw happening around me. And that's what I choose. That's what I've always chosen to write about. and that reflects in the play The Legends Of Them

Susan Wokoma: Absolutely.

Sutara Gayle: It's what I know. I'm just writing about what I know and what I've seen and what I've experienced. Everyone has their own trajectory, everybody's got their own story. And this is just me sharing my story. And what. How I interpret what I've seen and what I've experienced. Do you know what I mean?

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, completely now. So I've got like a real I mean, I'd say everyone

loves music, but I've got a real like, admiration for music, artists and also for performance artists. Because so much everything kind of what they do is to do with them. And with acting, there is a certain amount of putting on the mask and you know, especially if you're doing screen stuff, you learn your lines, you're being slotted into this world that isn't yours or necessarily your words. So you going to train as an actor How did you. How did you come about that? How did that, How did you come to that decision? And also how have you found. Because you've done amazing. You've got amazing credits of being in other people's work. But how did that differ to, you, Driving narratives?

Sutara Gayle: It's, really funny. My dear friend Kofi was, going to Lewisham College at one point and I remember saying to her, do you know what? I really want to start doing something different because I was doing music and I've been doing music all my life. And I said, look, you know, I want to be more like a. More of a role model for my son and, you know, he's about to start secondary school. I want to really start doing something. And she said, but, you know, you've always loved acting. And there's. They've got an acting course at Lewisham College. Why don't you apply for that? And as soon as she said that, it just landed in my heart. It was like, of course, I just automatically just felt excited. And at the time I was like about 30, 34, 35. Yeah, yeah, yeah. and that's exactly what I did. I applied for Lewisham College, got in and did the BTEC in Performing arts. Done two years there. And it was. The teachers there, it was. I, did it because I was like, I, can do some acting again. That is my goal. And the teachers there that, you know, I guess they were so impressed with my acting that they said, you know, by the end of it, you know, they was like, you need to go into drama school. At that point, I had no idea I could go to drama school or. I didn't know nothing about drama school or what that world. I didn't know anything about that world. But, I had the best teachers, especially, one called, Marxell, who really worked with me and

said, go to Audition to as much drama schools as you can. I ended up auditioning for about five and he helped me with my speech. Titania, these are the forgeries of jealousy. and, And we. We wrote a part called June Moon, a comedy sketch.

Susan Wokoma: Aw wow

Sutara Gayle: Actually that was my first real comedy sketch actually, when you think about it. and, he really, really worked with me after hours out of school. I met him in restaurants, and all sorts and he really worked with me. And you know, I did. I got into Rose, Bruford But it was a one year course.

Susan Wokoma: Okay.

Sutara Gayle: Right. and I didn't want to do a one year course. I wanted to do a whole three years because I hadn't. I left school so many years ago. and I left with no qualifications or anything.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: So I wanted to really go all the way.

Susan Wokoma: Study.

Sutara Gayle: Yeah. And study and find out what this thing is really about. Because this is something I really, really love. So let me find out what the techniques are and what I can really learn. and I got into Webber Douglas and that was a whole journey in itself because the first. When I first. When I got in, I realised that they didn't give out these

awards anymore.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: And, so I couldn't go for the first year because I couldn't afford it. It was like 30 grand. And I was like, yeah, where am I gonna get that from.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: so I did a big old, concert. God, I'm [she paused, tearing up] feeling really emotional about it. Sorry. Yes, I did a real big concert and I had my darling Louisa Mark, who's no longer with us, come and sing. And all of the reggae fraternity. Peter Huntingale Tipper, Irie Winston, Reedy, Janet K, Carol Thompson. We just did this big lovers, this Lovers rock and dj, show at a place called Imperial Gardens that was in Camberwell.

00:15:00

Sutara Gayle: And, it was to raise money, funds to go to drama school. I won't forget all of those people and all of the radio stations that helped me. VibeZ fm, Sir Lloyd, Courtney Melody, all of the people that helped me to. Saying that, you know, and they was on the radio saying, we gotta get Lorna into Drama School. We gotta get Lorna

Susan Wokoma: That's so moving.

Sutara Gayle: You know. And anyway, cut a long story short, I was able to go and I showed the video, was able to show it to the Head Master and said, look, if you get me

into this school, if you let me go to school, I need to get some kind of, sponsorship.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Sutara Gayle: I said, I'll be Britain's answer to Whoopi Goldberg. I was like, I said, I'll be, I would be, you know, a great asset to your school. And then he told me about a Dada award that was coming out at that time. And he said that normally the minimum age is 18 and the maximum age was 32. And at that point I was 35. Yeah. But he said, go for it anyway and let's just see, you know what I mean? Can't make any promises. And I went for it three times and the third time they, they accepted me and I got the, I got the award and I was able to go to Webber Douglas.

Susan Wokoma: Wow.

Sutara Gayle: For the whole three years. And it was, I went when I was 37 and I graduated at 40.

Susan Wokoma: Oh my gosh, yes!

Sutara Gayle: And it was the, it was the best three years of my life. It was the best and the worst.

Susan Wokoma: Of course. Yes. As training normally is.

Sutara Gayle: Right. Because. And also, you know, when I went there, I'm a rebel now. So I'm like, you know, the teachers are trying to change the way I talk or change the way I dance. And I'm just saying, listen, I've gone through life, you don't even know

nothing, you understand? But then after a while, after a while I had to like really buckle down and humble myself.

Susan Wokoma: Sure.

Sutara Gayle: Yeah. And that's when I really started to really learn. And actually not only learn, but I was able to teach them.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, of course.

Sutara Gayle: As well. So we were both. And it was a teacher- One of the teachers that said to me that you have something to teach us as well. It's not just, you know, and that's when, you know, I started to really gain more, ah, confidence as well. Because, you know, at that time, as I said, I left school so long ago. and I was, I was around these, all these young people that were just brilliant. They were just, to me, they was like, oh my God. A lot of them just left, you know, uni, but, you know, I became the mother of them all.

Susan Wokoma: Gorgeous.

Sutara Gayle: and it was great. And you know, say the rest is history

Susan Wokoma: The rest is the rest of history. The rest is here. Now we have to talk about The Legends Of Them and the fact that it's here just really quickly.

Susan Wokoma: I mean.

Susan Wokoma: How do you say this? Quickly? It's been a ten year process, right. Roughly in terms of inception, in terms.

Sutara Gayle: Of putting it on.

Susan Wokoma: So can you talk, us through what that process has been like in terms of when you first had the idea? I know that it's based on you and your experiences and the silent retreat that you went to in India. And I read online that you go into that silent retreat was definitely at the beginning. That's when you sort of had all these memories that were, you'd long forgotten come back to you. And that's what this is, it's a memory. So how talk about the process of putting this show together.

Sutara Gayle: as you say it did, it kind of started there at the silent retreat. I went there. I'm fortunate to be the, the sister of, a great guru Mooji. And for many years I didn't know what he was doing. I just, we just like he just went off to India and was like, oh, okay, he's gone again, you know, but I never really understood. And this one time I went to India with him thinking I'm going to go on a holiday, and then he was like, he just dropped it on me. Oh yeah, you know, we're going to be doing a silent retreat, you know, 10 day silent retreat. I was like, ah, [they laugh] a silent retreat. What does that mean? That you don't talk? And he was like, he was like, yeah, you don't talk. Yeah, I really, I just thought it was a joke.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Sutara Gayle: and you know, when I realised that it was, this is serious. And then also I said, I want to go all the way. if this is something that I'm to get, then, then let me get it. And that was my prayer to God, to the heavens, to the universe. If there's something

that I'm supposed to get from this, let me get it, please. And, that's how it all started. So that first four days of that silent retreat, my mind was noisier than it's ever been before.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Sutara Gayle: I mean, because you're silent. When you're silent you can hear. You can really hear. And I think everything that happened in my life just started to come up. People that I hadn't thought of for 40 years started to appear and I'm like, you know what I mean like, it was just really blowing my mind, literally blowing my mind, you know, and it was scary at first. I was like, you know. But as you know, when you stick with it

00:20:00

Sutara Gayle: and the mind starts to quieten down and you just realise that, okay, this is how you can really know who you are, you know. And that's where my actual real spiritual journey began. And I started to listen, listen to my brother on a much deeper level. And everything that he was saying, all of his pointings were just landing in my heart, landing and landing. And because we grew up Ah. In a Seventh Day Adventist household. Many of the stuff that we was taught from the Bible, I had a much better understanding when I was hearing it from my brother.

Susan Wokoma: Interesting.

Sutara Gayle: So much more understanding of the stories, and the meanings, you know, and So that's. Yeah, so that's where it start. A lot, a lot of my fear started to drop away. I mean it's not, it doesn't just happen just like that, of course. Yeah. But to cut a

long story short, a lot of the stuff that I was holding, and what I was holding on to started to shed. They just started to shed. And it's been a journey ever since then. Just shedding, shedding, shedding, shedding, shedding. And that's what, that's where we are with the, with *The Legends Of Them*. It's about, the characters that appeared to me, things that I hadn't let go of, that I thought, well, it's not that I had, that I hadn't let go. I forgot I buried them. So this is what these things were when I realised it. It's stuff that I had buried and everything that I was doing in my life, everything that was informing my actions was based on these things that I'd buried. Do you know what I mean? And I realised that unless I face it, it's always going to be there and I'm always going to be doing the same things. I'm always going to be making the same errors and the same, you know, repeat. It's just repetitive. It just keeps going and going. And, and then that's when I said, no, no, no, I don't want to hold on to that false narrative, that false sense of self anymore. You know, I want to be the real, true, authentic being who God made me to be. And that's when this journey really, really started. And that's what I write about. I write about the things that were holding me. The things that were holding me. And once you, once you put it out there, it dissipates.

Sutara Gayle: You know what I mean?

Susan Wokoma: It loses its power.

Sutara Gayle: It loses its power, man. And you know. Yeah, it becomes very cathartic and therapeutic and it's like And it makes you realise, because the story, I didn't write it for that I didn't know what I was writing. You know, I was just writing experiences. And these were the stories. And the great Nina, and Dawn and Jo McInnes helped me to form, you know, to form a shape, Around this story. And that's when it started to make sense of what this story really was about because we didn't know what it was about

and we just, and I just had to trust the process and just allow the story to inform us what it was going to be about. And the more it informed us, the more we were able to structure and shape and, you know, rejig and that's it. That's The Legends Of Them.

Susan Wokoma: That's the legends of them. Now to close. Oh my gosh, I've got so much more, got so much more. Literally haven't asked all of them. but to close, I ask the same question to everybody. What does it mean to you to have your play here at the Royal Court?

Sutara Gayle: You're gonna make me again, innit? Is that why you're trying to do? [they laugh]

Susan Wokoma: I'm not, I'm not. But if you cry, I'm gonna cry.

Sutara Gayle: You know what the thing about it is? as I said, we said at the beginning, the Royal Court was one of the first places that I did my, my debut on stage whilst I was still at drama school. I got casted by Paulette Randall to do Blessed Be the Tie to play a 69 year old woman when I was, you know.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, yeah.

Sutara Gayle: Beside Ellen Thomas and it was one of the greatest experiences, one of the greatest experiences of my life and that it's just come round full circle. And then I met Nina, Nina Lyndon from the Hackney Showroom right here. And she was the head of the Young Writer's Programme and she got me in as an actor to work with some young writers. and we were here and it was great, it was fantastic. Was working with the young writers and then at the end was able to act their work. so, you know, we all

started here. Jo McInnes she started here as well in her first play, 4.48 Psychosis where she's going to be coming back. it started here. So it's like us three and we've been working so tightly together. We've been working together for the last seven years at least. it's like. Yeah, so the feeling is like, it's serendipity.

Susan Wokoma: Ah.

Sutara Gayle: Do you know what I mean? And it's like, it's,

00:25:00

Sutara Gayle: we've, we've gone through so much corners, so many different places with this play. It's been the. I can't even begin to tell you about the process because it would take days.

Susan Wokoma: Yes, of course.

Sutara Gayle: But just to know, just to say that, you know, when you plant, when you plant a seed, you don't know that you can't force it to grow. You don't know because the play has been into so many different people's hands, so many different writers, so many different workshops, so many different, you know, circumstances this play has been. And, you don't know where it actually lands. You know what I mean? And who remembers? So, yeah, it means. It just means a lot. It really, really means a lot. It feels like it's come around full circle. And, yeah, you can't rush the process. You can never rush. Don't rush the process, man, because it's not up to us neither. And just know that we think that we go here and this one and someone close the door when you go here and someone closes the door. But not every closed door is a closed door. You know

what I mean?

Susan Wokoma: Absolutely.

Sutara Gayle: Some of them remain open, but we forget about them.

Susan Wokoma: That's true.

Sutara Gayle: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: That's true.

Sutara Gayle: Yeah. So we just, you know, go along and just trust.

Susan Wokoma: Thank you so, so much. I cannot wait to see *The Legends of Them*.
Thank you.

Sutara Gayle: 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 Court's new season at royalcourththeatre.com. Follow us [royalcourttheatre](#) on Instagram and, [royalcourt](#) on X. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Royal Court Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast. See you soon.

00:26:58