

S8 Ep2: Amy Jephta talks to Susan Wokoma

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Please note the following episode may contain strong language.

Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma and our guest for this episode, Amy Jephta Amy, Jephta, I'm going to just do a little intro which is going to be.

Amy Jephta: I'll just sit here awkwardly

Susan Wokoma: Just sit here awkwardly. You can look off to the ceiling. It'll be done in a minute.

Amy Jephta: Thank you.

Susan Wokoma: Amy is a South African playwright, screenwriter, and actor based in Cape Town. Amy was the recipient of the Baxter Theatre Director's Bursary in 2010. She's also the co founder and producer, of the Paper Jet Productions. She was named one of the Mail and Guardian's 200 Top Young South Africans in 2013. And Amy is also South Africa's highest art accolade. recipient: The Standard Bank Young artist award of 2019. Amy's plays include This Liquid Earth, a eulogy in verse, All Who Pass, and Shoes, which were at, the Royal Court. Also Other People's Lives, Flight Lessons, Damage Control, Kitchen Interiors, Pornography. I think you know where I'm going with this. We also have your wonderful new play, A Good House, going to premiere here in the Royal Court. Welcome to the Playwright's Theatre podcast.

Amy Jephtha: Thank you so much.

Susan Wokoma: So I ask everybody this at the beginning of every single episode. What is your first experience of theatre?

Amy Jephtha: First experience of theatre? At my, grandmother's house, actually. I have, I come from a family who loves a bit. I come from a family of storytellers. Not, formal storytellers, not trained storytellers, but oral storytellers. and I remember gathering in my grandmother's house, sitting on the floor and being kind of wowed by my, uncles and my father, who's a really great storyteller, really funny. just speaking, really. and the way that we used to share in our family is, you know, they would love an anecdote, they would love a recollection, they would love a memory, they would love a story. And I remember just being in my grandmother's house and being absolutely enthralled by, those stories and listening to my dad talk about his youth and listening to my uncles talk about when they were kids getting up to no good. And so, yeah, I think what is theatre if not people gathered in a space listening to a story, sharing time and space. So, that would probably be my earliest memory of what I consider to be theatre and what I still consider to be theatre.

Susan Wokoma: Absolutely.

Susan Wokoma: So let's just talk about your journey becoming a playwright, because obviously, you've grown up and been influenced by the tradition of telling stories just through word of mouth. But how did you sort of discover the act of, like, committing stories as text? Like, when did that begin?

Amy Jephtha: I mean, I didn't know that there was such a thing called a playwright. I

remember being, quite attracted in high school to the idea of, like, live performance. And obviously there was the annual kind of school play. And, we would always pick up a text from, like, our dusty school library, you know, like an old, I'm not going to mention names, but, you know, the old plays, and we would try to revive it. And I remember thinking in high school, this has nothing to do with me. So it's so irrelevant. These texts that we're picking up, they were just like old English texts written by old dead white men. And then at some point, I remember going to, my drama teacher and saying, I think I'd actually love to be able to write the play this year. And I didn't know what that meant yet. And I had seen play texts, obviously, in traditional form, but I'd never written something myself. and she was like, yeah, let's. Let's do it. Like, we would love to have a new play or a new piece of writing.

Amy Jephta: I think 13, 14. So that was about grade, what, six. No, eight. Grade eight or grade nine. At the beginning of high school, my drama teacher, to her great credit, was like, yeah, sure, we'll put that all in your hands. And I remember not knowing what we were doing, but working in a kind of workshop tradition that I kind of figured out later when I went to theatre school is really how we make work in South Africa, it's not a playwright sitting down, a single person beginning with the written word, a solo playwright. But you start with a company. You start with actors on the floor, you start with improvisation, you start with play. And then the playwright's job in that room is to start to commit the words down to paper as it's being made by human bodies live in the space. So it would be a day of playing, workshopping, scene improvisation, and then me going home at the end going like, what do I want to capture there? And then writing the scenes and then bringing those scenes back the next day, and we'd play some more and then I'd refine and edit. And

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Amy Jephta: it was just that kind of. Yeah, I guess a devised workshop process. And I fell in love with it like really the wonderful semester of high school that I will always remember because that's when I think I discovered theatre quite by accident. I discovered the, the process of devising and making and workshopping and play and then playwriting through it. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Do you, do you remember what that play was about? Or did you. Did you have an idea of what that play was going to be about before you were in the room with all the actors?

Amy Jephta: Yeah, I came to them with an idea. So that the. Oh, gosh, it's painful to recount. It was about a, It was about a young black girl who found herself, writing a fairy tale and then falling into the fairytale that she was writing and then, becoming disenchanted with the tropes of like, I guess an imaginary fairy tale life. So she brought her, oh gosh, I shudder to think about it. She brought her like, smile and her personality to like, her fairy tale world that she slowly started to kind of like pull apart. It was called Disenchantment. Oh, how horrible. I think I have this. I think I have that thing somewhere that's basically.

Susan Wokoma: Isn't that like Enchanted? They basically nicked it off you.

Amy Jephta: Right?

Susan Wokoma: It's basically.

Amy Jephta: I mean, gosh, this was. Yeah, this was 2004. So. Yeah, yeah. Ah, now I beat them to it and then they turned into a film and they made a lot of money. That's my

ip.

Susan Wokoma: This is going on. Let's just sort that out. So, okay, so in terms of how you approach, putting together a story, putting together a show, how different is it from that initial instinctive method of working when you were 13, 14.

Amy Jephta: Yeah, I mean, I think now, as I think matured and I think probably started to... I went to study theatre. Off the back of that, ah, of having like a really, I guess falling in love with the instinct of theatre in high school I went to study it and then kind of went, oh, there's like a, there's such a thing called a playwright. And I had a rather formal then induction into the form. and then I think just became obsessed with the literary quality of playwriting, the written text, kind of absorbed and threw myself into reading as many plays as I could. I think it was like quite a miracle for me when I walked into, in my first year of theatre school, a library that was dedicated to plays, the Heading Hall Library at the University of Cape Town, which has such a beautiful collection of plays I'd never been able to get my hands on. And I just kind of devoured them in like my first and second year I read that entire library end to end. Like I'd read everything I could get my hands on. and then kind of started playing more formally with the Yeah. With, with the literary form of playwriting. And it's quite different. I haven't worked in a devised environment for a very long time. Now my process is kind of Yeah. I start with an idea, a theme of feeling and intuition, a gut. And I sit down and I like start to write and it's usually quite a solitary process until it gets to this stage of the rehearsal where. Yeah, you're starting to play. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Do you enjoy the solitude of writing?

Amy Jephta: I've come to. Yes. I think it's like quite a, it's quite a sacred space for me

and I've built quite a, I guess, rituals around the way I write. I love to write early in the morning, like wake up before sunrise. I like to be in the flow of writing as the sun comes up so that I can take like a little bit of a breather at like dawn. I love the pre dawn hours. I love writing in my pyjamas. I love writing with like in a cosy space. Like I create like a really cosy environment in my house. I love to feel completely safe when I write. So I can't write in a coffee shop. I can't write when there are other people around. I can't squeeze it in in between things. I need that like space carved out that feels kind of ritualistic. and for that I enjoy the solitary pursuit because that feels like sort of my time when I get to kind of wrestle with whatever's cooking at that point. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So talk us through how you've incorporated... Cause you've done so much in terms of theatre but then also screenwriting and being a performer. Like how do you manage to integrate all those different facets? As, for instance, I know loads of theatre writers who think writing for television is this ridiculous kind of kind of bastardised version of. [laughter]

Amy Jephtha: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: But you've got to sort of like cut it in to fit into the whole. So like how do you kind of. You've talked about how you create this sacred, ritualistic experience of writing. Is that something that remains when you write for screen?

Amy Jephtha: Not at all. [laughter] Yeah. It's not. I

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Amy Jephtha: mean TV and film, like. I mean I started writing TV to actually make money

as a writer. Right. Like

Susan Wokoma: love you theatre, but you don't pay

Amy Jephta: I'm Gonna earn a little. but you make us poor and we do it because we love you, not because you earn us enough money to make a living. So I transitioned into, like, film and TV, like six or seven years ago. And it's such a different, I mean, I love the medium. Like, I love being able to tell story through, cinema and through the screen. I really love the art of the edits and being able to write, for that form is like a particular muscle by itself. it's a kind of poetry that I see it as. You really have to condense and you have to, think in the cuts. Whereas with theatre you have so much time to expand and explore and, you can dive deeper, into something. But I think, yeah, TV and, I've started to kind of really enjoy that medium. It works at, like, a much faster pace. Like, things don't have that much time to cook. Sometimes I sit with plays for years and years before I'm ready to start writing it. With theatre, I mean, with film and TV especially, you're on a clock. Like, you know, there's a broadcast date and things move at a crazy pace. but I also started my, my TV career writing for a Daily Soap, which is a different kind.

Susan Wokoma: So that's a

Amy Jephta: Yeah, that's a different kind of bastardization, but also a different kind of discipline. [laughter] Because every Thursday, no matter what, you have to deliver an episode of television, like every Thursday on the clock. And what that kind of taught me was just like a, I think like a discipline of being able to churn out pages no matter whether they're good or they just have to get done. Yeah. And sometimes I can be very indulgent with playwriting. Like, ah, I'll just be like, this will take years and I will be

thinking and I'll be making endless reams of notes and have lots of notebooks filled and lots of little memos everywhere. And it will never get done. But with film and tv, you're just like, I have to finish this. Like, there's a deadline tomorrow.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So you've had, you know, you've done so much here at the Royal Court and in the UK. I'm really interested as to what, what brought you here, what made you. In fact, actually, if I'm being really honest, I'll just say what my original question was. Why do we deserve you in the UK?

Amy Jephta: Very generously, you phrase that question. It was the Royal Court, actually, was my entry into the UK theatre world and into London really was my induction. In 2012, Elise Dodgson, who is head of international at the Court at the time, started doing a series of outreaches to different countries and for, and I know she did it in, in the Middle East and. But for that year, her outreach was to South Africa and she came to South Africa to do her, like, initial reconnaissance, where she comes to kind of meet young playwrights and see what we're writing about and thinking about and what we're doing. And I remember not being invited to this meet and greet and going onto the Royal Court website and being like, who is this Elise and how do I get hold of her and emailing her directly and saying, I have not been invited to this group, but I really think you should meet me. and to her credit, she was always so responsive, no matter where the call came from. And she said, you have to just come, come to the theatre and come and meet me. And that was the first introduction to the Court. And I knew about the Court because, by that time I had been a theatre student. And every single play I picked up and loved the front page of that play, said it debuted at the Royal Court and some of my favourite playwrights and the best plays I read, I was like, this building

and this theatre lived in my imagination so profoundly. as I was a student. And when I heard Elise was coming out there, I was like, somehow she needs to like me. I need to become her friend. She needs to take me back with her. And she did that initial meeting which was so general. I mean, it was just like an introduction to the Court and what they do and how interested she was in South African theatre and asking us what we were writing about and thinking about. And it was like one day workshop. And after that she invited a small group of us, I think six, seven of us to come and do a workshop with herself and Ola. I, ah, think, Amina Shuan and, Winson Pinnock, they came out to South Africa and we spent a week with them. and what an incredible week. I've never been that held as a playwright. I've never like, had as much like, rigorous discourse around not only the form, but around what we were writing about. Like being really engaged with, us as storytellers. And I just knew I was like, I somehow need to get to the Royal Court.

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Amy Jephta: So every time, I think throughout this journey, it was me like, trying to chase my way into the Court. And that was now already, gosh, 12 years ago. And my relationship with the Court has been, you know, coming on for that long. And through that introduction I was able to make friends at the Bush and at the Jermyn Street. And you know, all of the other producers and directors and people I've come to work with has really been through them. Seeing my work, I got repped because my, agents saw a reading of mine at the Court. So, yeah, this has been my gateway really.

Susan Wokoma: So it was the Royal Court that brought you over.

Amy Jephta: Exactly, exactly. So, yeah, I, guess it was discovered and then introduced.

Susan Wokoma: So you were talking about the kind of interrogation of what you want to write about and what you're called to write for and your involvement in that. So can you talk a bit about, where your kind of heart settles in terms of what you want to use your voice for? And if that has changed because you've been writing for so long, do you feel like there is a core kind of mission statement to what you want to explore as a writer or.

Amy Jephta: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Has that developed as you go?

Amy Jephta: I guess. Yeah. It's difficult for me ever to pin that. I kind of am able to see a thread of my.. Through my work based on other people kind of feeding back to me and being able to match the dots. I very rarely am able to kind of see my own through line. I will say that I started out writing, I think very generic sort of stories. I was trying to distance myself from my specificity for a long time. From being South African, from being a black woman in South Africa, from negotiating my particular place in the world. I was kind of trying to, write for everyone and. And be universal like I think. Yeah. And for a long time that was where I was, wading. And then, yeah, I think the. The time I really started to find my voice is when I began to embrace the specificity of what makes me, me. the kind of body I live in, the experience I come from. And that experience is always, filtered through. I. It means to be a black woman in the world. and I think I write through a very feminist lens often. I, don't necessarily. I don't like to say that I write political pieces, but my pieces are by their very nature political. It's inescapable, I think, in my work. I write a lot about, I think about memory and family and heritage and yeah, my work has been containers for all those kinds of themes, but it's, I think, very difficult for me even to define what I write about. I know it's very instinctual. And always, somehow there is a through line from the things I'm exploring. Yeah, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: I guess you can only really see that through line once the plays have been birthed, really. And then you sort of go 'oh, okay'.

Amy Jephta: You've stepped back from it a little bit. And I guess once people start to have discourse about your work, then you're able to kind of go, oh, I see. I've been telling the same story in different ways this whole time.

Susan Wokoma: And let's talk about your play.

Amy Jephta: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: A Good House, which will be here at the Royal Court, which I'm sure will have a lot of discourse.

Susan Wokoma: I've read it.

Susan Wokoma: It's absolutely fantastic. I cannot wait to hear people's reactions to it. But obviously, if everyone's listening, there will be loads of people listening to the podcast. They'll have no idea what the play is about. So can you just summarise what A Good House is about?

Amy Jephta: Yeah, I mean, on its. On its surface, A Good House, is a story of a young couple, Sihle and Bonolo Humberto, who move into a community where they. A predominantly white community, where they are the only black couple. and when, a shack, or like an informal dwelling springs up on an open patch of land in this very guarded, closed community, the, Humbertos are asked to be the face of a campaign to evict this group of squatters from that land. And that starts to bring up, I think, a lot of

drama around, not only the community politics and what that means for them, but also what it means for these two people in this relationship. And I think, yeah, it's really a story about how, as black people, even in our most intimate of spaces, there are still, we're still subject to our context, our place in the world, our politics, the social dynamics, that influence even our most private of relationships. And yeah, that's what *A Good House* is generally about.

Susan Wokoma: Do you know, one of the things that I absolutely love, and this is my actress head, when I started

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Susan Wokoma: reading it, right at the top, you have this stage direction, which is that this dialogue is meant to be read very fast. And it's so strange because that influenced how I read it?

Amy Jephtha: Right.

Susan Wokoma: I was reading it so fast, but it. I could get the kind of. All those kind of. You think the play is about one thing or it gives it. It gives you the kind of air that it's about this kind of, you know, kind of around a kitchen sink, talking. But it's so much deeper. And there is that kind of mystical nature as well with the structure that, the shack that appears as well. So how long did it take you to come up, because you've spoken about your process. How long did it take you to come up with this idea before you started writing putting like pen to paper on *A Good House*?

Amy Jephtha: I mean, this was like. I think this was cooking thematically for a very long

time, which is not, usually how I approach a play. Usually I will have an idea and try and test it out on the page. But with this one, I, I felt like, And I was trying to describe it to the cast because they're always curious, what is the origin story of the play? And for me it was, It. It was a gut feeling. It was like an instinct. It was something. An indescribable feeling I couldn't put my finger on that I was trying to articulate for a long time. It was about my own. I think. I think I was thinking a lot about assimilation. About, like. About what, How much bending and changing and moulding and how chameleonic, you have to be as a person of colour to survive in a white world, a world where you are not the centre. and how much.

Amy Jephtha: Yeah. How much change.. How much.. Yeah. I guess the only way to say it is how. What a chameleon you have to be to survive. And so, yeah, I'd been thinking about that for a long time. I'd been thinking a lot about the spaces that I had occupied where I was the first, usually always the first of my kind. I was thinking a lot about black exceptionalism, about the weight and the burden of being the first in a space and how often I had been that person. And the very slippery feeling of, being, I guess, feeling like. Like all the. All you are and everyone who looks like you is on your shoulders. And you can never walk into a space just kind of being yourself. You are always carrying the weight of everyone who looks like you because you're the first one in that space. You know what I mean? Like, you are not only ever just Amy there, you are also the first black woman to D d d d. Or the first person of colour to etc. Etc. Etc. Or the first woman to blah, blah, blah. So you're always carrying all of that with you.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Amy Jephtha: And that. And that weight was starting to feel, burdensome. And it. It was a.. Ah. It gave me like a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I was like, this needs to be

articulated somehow. And so having sat with that feeling and the discomfort of it and, like, pummelled it a bit and wrestled with it. Yeah. For, like, a few months. And then the play kind of was written over a weekend. It came out really fast.

Susan Wokoma: Over a weekend?

Amy Jephta: Yeah. Just really quickly. Yes. Like from a Friday to a Sunday. I. I wrote the first draft and it. I think it just, like, kind of splashed onto the page, all of this, like, icky negotiations I had been doing, for myself my whole life.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, That's definitely what I got from it. That kind of the black exceptionalism thing. And also this idea of. I wrestle with it, the kind of individualism, because I feel like, you know, a lot of what makes society wonderful and brilliant and creates progress is community. It's thinking about other people as well as yourself. And yet the experience I feel as, a black person in the arts is that you... You are not afforded that individualism that, like, what do I want to do? What's my. What's my expression? It's constantly. It's constantly getting that question of, like, so tell us about being a black artist. And you're like, it's annoying because you are.

Susan Wokoma: And you're not.

Susan Wokoma: You're not ashamed of that. But when it is the only thing that you have to kind of, you know, navigate your creativity from, it can be quite. Quite a lot.

Amy Jephta: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Ah, yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. So let's just quickly talk about. Well,

it's not always a quick process, but in terms of. Okay, so you've been living with this instinct for the play for a few months. You write it over a weekend and then, just for. Because I know there's a lot of people who listen to this podcast who really are green to playwriting. So what has been the process from. Okay, you've written the first draft over a weekend to it coming to the Royal Court.

Amy Jephta: Yeah. I mean, this has been a long, steeping process, I must say. Like, it's. The play was commissioned in 2018.

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Amy Jephta: [she counts her fingers and mumbles] it's what, six years later?

Susan Wokoma: It's too many years,

Amy Jephta: a lot of years later. [they laugh] And it's also Covid years later. So it's about a decade later. And here we are and the play is about to debut next year. So it was commissioned originally. I was given a blank slate, which is very, very, very generous of the Court. They commissioned me with no expectations. Vicky Featherstone, at the time, artistic director of the Court, said, we'd love a play from you, tell us what you want to write. Which was like being given a blank cheque. And I was kind of in awe for a bit. And then it took me, like, months to recover to, like, the stage fright of, like, oh, I can write absolutely anything. And then I was like, okay, this is gonna be the play. And then I let it sit for a bit and I. And I wrote that first draft. I put that draft aside for, I think, six months. It really scared me. I felt it was messy, it was raw, it was ugly, it was, like, on the nose. People were really angry in the play. It was too raw. I set it aside, and I didn't come back to it for a while. And the Court didn't bother me about it, which is lovely. The

literary department knows. They know how to give playwright space. They're like, we're not. We'll commission you and then we'll never ask you about it again. No, they do, but they'll give you, like, a good year and then they'll come back to you. and then I went back to it, and then as I read it, I was like, this needs to be a comedy. We can't be talking about this kind of. The stuff I want to talk about is so prickly and so, slimy and so uncomfortable that I can't do it in this, like, serious, earnest tone. It has to be funny. And so I kind of gave myself the challenge of rewriting it as a comedy. and that's what the second draft became. I was like, how can I make this as funny, as absurd, and just kind of, mess around with the... With the earnestness of what we're talking about? How can I cover up all of this mess that I've made here on the page, now that I know what the play is about with other stuff, how can I layer it with, social niceties? With, you know, with. With rituals? with, like, human, little human moments and interactions? I'm gonna just put jokes in there. Gosh,

Susan Wokoma: There's a joke. [they laugh]

Amy Jephta: Yeah. Just like, keep it shoo. Keep it on its, like, feet. Keep it. Keep it moving. And then that's what the play became. That's what I. The draft I then gave, which everyone seemed, to respond to. And then from there, it was so much in those six years of putting down the play and coming back to it. Putting down. Coming back to it. And every time I came back to it, it was cooking always in the back of my mind. Every time I came back to it there was a new layer of truth that I found for myself and a new thing I wanted to say with it and a new something that I saw in between the lines. And I was able to do a draft and a redraft just from putting it away and giving it the space it needed to cook, really. And so I think the play was kind of finished in its final form only about three months before they decided to programme it. Yeah. So the final draft which was actually a reversion to a previous draft because always happens. I went back two

drafts I went too far. Uh-huh. I did two draughts too many. I broke the play's back. [Susan laughs] I turned it into. It was hard. It was hard. It became something else completely. And then everyone was like, no, you had the play two drafts ago, let's just go back there. So we overshoot it and then came back and that whole thing took, like, six years to get there.

Susan Wokoma: So I think it's. I just think it's really important for listeners to understand that it. It can take that amount of time.

Amy Jephta: Doesn't have to.

Susan Wokoma: It doesn't have to. No, no, no, that's true.

Amy Jephta: But it can.

Susan Wokoma: But it can.

Amy Jephta: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So just to wrap up, I would like to ask you, what does it mean to have your play here at Court?

Amy Jephta: I mean, it has had me, in moments, completely emotional. I was going back the other. When I got here, I went back on my Instagram and I saw that the first play I saw here was Let the Right One In, I think. Oh, yeah. And I. And I came off the tube, you know, the Gens of Edgar was the first one, maybe. All right, don't remember which one came first, but I remember getting off the tube and seeing the Court for the

first time and I remember taking a photo of that and it was on my Instagram and I, like, vision boarded it on my Instagram. I was like, here, this, that, that. This place is where I want to be. I remember visiting it the first time as part of the residency, the South African Writers Residency, and walking through the building and being like, oh, my God, it's plays I have only ever read about. And here they were, they were on the stage in this building. I can't actually express how incredibly full circle it is for me and how I'm constantly, like, pinching myself and I don't know if I'm going to be able to contain myself when I come back in January and see

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Amy Jephtha: my play mounted on that stage. Like, I think it's just the like a dream come true that I've kind of held for, like, 15 years or so. and so it really feels like a homecoming to a home I've never really actually been in, but it feels like a homecoming because I've had such a long run with the court. it's. Yeah, it's incredibly special. And every day of this process so far, I've just been, like, constantly tapping myself and pinching myself and being like, oh, okay, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here. And having my director, my incredible director, Nancy, remind me that you belong here and it's your time to be here, and it's not by accident. And, you know, she's been such a holder for that for me to not kind of let the experience pass me by, but actually just sit in it. she tells me that in some form every day. So, yeah, incredibly special.

Susan Wokoma: Amy, thank you so much.

Amy Jephtha: Thank you, Susan. Thank you. Yay.

Susan Wokoma: Thanks for listening to the Royal Court 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 royalcourttheatre.com follow us oyalcourttheatre on Instagram and Royal Court Court on X. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Royal Court Court Theatre Playwright's Podcast. See you soon.

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