

Interview Edited Transcription

Interviewee:

Yaël Farber

Interviewer:

Mark Fleishman

Transcriber:

Jayne Batzofin

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Fleishman:

Good afternoon. So this is an interview with Yaël Farber on the 25th of February 2021, as part of the ReTAGS (Reimagining Tragedy in Africa and the Global South) research project. Hi, and thank you very much for agreeing to participate Yaël. Can you begin by just introducing yourself in the way you would like to introduce yourself (*chuckles*)?

Farber:

(*Laughs*) I'm a director, Yaël Farber, I'm a director, born and raised in South Africa left in my mid-30s. I'm back often, with my family still in South Africa, and to create there when I can. But I've been working internationally as a director now for the last decade. And touring my work prior to that, internationally, which exposed the work in a different way, it's revealed the work in a different way. So I'm a director, I'm a playwright and a creator.

Fleishman:

Okay, so our main focus today, we're going to start off by talking about *Molora*, particularly - as a production. So can you start off by saying, how the idea arose for doing the production? Why is the production called *Molora*? How did you get to the title, and what Greek text is it based on?

Farber:

So it's based on the *Oresteia*, and it was just after the 9/11 tragedy, I will say, if it fits the genre of tragedy. The world seemed in a very, very particular place in the way it was digesting vengeance. And I was very struck by the Bush administration's response to the ... the terrorist attacks on 9/11.

And this knee jerk response, which was an eye for an eye. And the creation really of evidence to support the idea to invade Iraq. And I compared this, you know, not intellectually, but at a very emotional level, with what I had witnessed in listening on the radio, and in reading about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, in which the, I'm going to call it technology, the emotional technology was so sophisticated, in terms of ... if we speak in terms of capacities of humanity, and this very primal need to face your persecutor, and the persecutor's reasons for being there. And this incredibly dynamic, and I'm an artist, so I look at things, you know, in the sense of while I was moved emotionally by what was happening in the country of my birth, I was struck by the dramatic, the stakes, and the incredibly compelling nature of these trials and these hearings, and how they were speaking most directly to what I have always understood to be misunderstood about the Greek tragedies when I've seen them staged. Because I think they often get reduced to this very strong drive to try and either honour something that we don't, we will never understand, because we will never know what the chorus sounded like, we will never know, truly the dynamic that was at play in those arenas. But I, I understand that they were a civic service, that theatre was a civic service, and that you were a better citizen, attending theatre in ancient Greece and you were considered so - we won't speak about women's attendance - but certainly, you know, in terms of what was permissible. But the tragedies written to some degree to help a nation reintegrate people back into society that were at the forefront of violence or within it, to understand the psychic violence that we all contain within us and that this was a place of cleansing, the catharsis. And so there was, you know, it's never an intellectual process for me when I, when I'm trying to put something together. I realise I keep a lot of notes and mind mapping over the years, I've got piles and piles of the stuff and I often sort of rifle through them and I'll see that something was tracking its way through my thoughts from years prior, and then its ... I go back and they... I weave them together in some sort of kind of unconscious way, I think that's how creativity works. I don't really understand how it works and I don't really want to understand how it works. But something about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Bush administration's response with the invasion of Iraq and this very primitive, spiritually primitive response, by what's considered to be one of the most sophisticated, you know, the largest liberal democracy in the world. And here we were, as a country emerging from one of the darkest chapters of modern history. And there was this very humble premise of people meeting across tables, and with microphones sometimes and witnesses, people who would sit in the galleries, or in the community halls, or whatever it was, and listen. And the ideas all started coming together, you know, as it does in a fairly random way. I knew I wanted to do something examining cycles of vengeance. And the way that Orestes is burdened with this responsibility, it's not even a responsibility, it's just, that is now his, that's his life. That's his lot. He must now wreak revenge on the murderer of his father. And so then I went out to meet the Ngqoko Cultural group and when I was putting together *Julius Caesar*, an adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, some years earlier, I'd heard the sound of the Ngqoko Cultural group doing their split tone singing, when I was trying to find sounds. And I, it's one of those things I'd filed it somewhere in my brain, I just sonically, I felt like that sounded like what the chorus must have done to audiences once upon a time. I think it's the greatest mystery that sits at the centre of these tragedies, is what is that technology of the chorus, all I know is that it's very rarely done in a way that doesn't kind of constipate any production that I've seen or hijack it. And I went out to the Transkei and I met with the Cultural group with the women and they were 18 to 20 matriarchs waiting to meet me in one of their huts. And we sat down and I said through a translator – they don't speak any English, just Xhosa – and I said, I'd like to tell you a story and see if you'd like to be involved in telling it, I told

them the story of the *Oresteia*. And as I was telling it, it took several hours to do so not only because everything was being translated, but more critically, I couldn't get more than two or three sentences past explaining the story when it would immediately just be taken up at the most personal level by the women. And they would discuss amongst themselves because there was a language barrier with me, but what it meant or what all the implications were that were happening to these children, Orestes and Electra. And I just sort of sat back or leaned forward, I can't remember but (*chuckles*) one of them, and watched this unfolding, this revelation to me of what it means to take, to be, to witness to something so personally that you are not this disaffected, disembodied concept that a director has. You are the digestive organs of the community. And you're metabolising the story with us, for us, because we as the audience don't get to speak but we need you almost to do it for us within the action. And these artists as part of the Ngqoko Cultural group, are women who have trained from when they're young girls and their technology - I'm going to keep using that word - with their singing voices and the uhadi bow and the milking drum and you know, they were playing different instruments for me. The line was dissolving completely between the lived experience and the conceptualising that one has as a director and there's a, obviously economically a very humble reality to these women's lives. And yet there was such investment in a story that, you know, perhaps one might assume for people who are, you know, in the daily toil of just keeping the wheel turning... why would they particularly care about some story from some far flung country in an ancient civilization and I could see that it ... that core truth was still operating so deeply. That makes the tragedies some kind of testament to how far we haven't come in several thousand years. So then, you know, the story itself - sorry you'll just have to tell me if I'm being too long winded, because I don't know what the you know, the level of detail you want. But just to get to the directness of the question, this fact that, you know, Greek tragedy has this capacity to take the domestic and reveal the national, and so it is just a family story.

Fleishman:

Yeah.

Farber:

But the burden of revenge. I knew that Clytemnestra is a wounded woman, the history of her relationship with Agamemnon. And her relationship, you know, going forward with her children, becomes one of the damaged person inflicting damage.

Fleishman:

Mm-hmm.

Farber:

And so, you know, it felt, I had concerns about it being a slightly crude decision to cast a white Clytemnestra, and a black Orestes and Electra, but I felt, if we managed to navigate this with integrity, we could open up a conversation that needed to happen. And I wanted to just tell you about how I came up with the ending, but maybe that's part of your next question. Sorry I feel like I've been speaking for 17 years now (*laughs*). But yeah, the story of how the ending came about and how we changed it is very particular. So -

Fleishman:

So let's come back to that -

Farber:

Sure.

Fleishman:

But just right at the very beginning, you didn't call the play the *Oresteia*, right? So it has its own title. And how did you come by that title?

Farber:

Yes. So I, the word "ash" just occurred to me as something that I, you know, in the aftermath of 9/11, the ash that was floating down on the city. I remember images of people walking home, or trying to find their way home - there was a man with a briefcase, just walking still holding his briefcase, but just *covered* in ash. And you couldn't see what race he was, you almost couldn't see what gender he was, except, you know that he was in a suit. And so, this ash floating down on the city was a very poignant image to me. It evoked many things, the aftermath of many things, the you know, the ash of any bombed out civilization, the concentration camps, that within that residue of what remains is our history. It changed form, it's changed form, but it's still in the air. It's in the ether. And it's with us all the time. And, you know, although the Ngqoko Cultural group are Xhosa, my lead actor, Orestes was Lebogang¹, and he was Setswana - he spoke Setswana. So, I also wanted to mix it up and not go with the Xhosa word for ash. So, I mean, this is this is how I came up with the title.

Fleishman:

Okay. And the production was done in 2007 am I right?

Farber:

(Softly laughter builds up) 100 years ago. Yes, I think so.

Fleishman:

Okay. And can you talk a little bit about the production history, so where it started and then how it travelled from there?

Farber:

I had won the Artist of the Year award with the Grahamstown - Standard Bank, Festival of the Arts. And so it was a commission, so I created it for the Grahamstown Festival. And we premiered there, and as with all things you don't know if it'll ever have a life. It was picked up by a presenter for the Kampnagel Festival in Hamburg². So we travelled there and then it just kind of gained an international life, it went to Amsterdam, it went to Germany, it went to Japan as well. But importantly, of course, for me was it went to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg. But as often happens, if I recall correctly, it kind of - that happened after one or two international bookings. And we... yes... I believe that was the only showing in South Africa was the Grahamstown Festival and

¹ Lebogang Elephant.

² Kampnagel Laokoon Festival - Hamburg, Germany

then the Market Theatre. And the piece definitely sat in its truth as it, you know, as our work does best in South Africa. But we had extraordinary responses overseas, I mean one night in Germany, in Hamburg, it sparked a post-show discussion that people on the crew in Germany said to me afterwards, things were said in that discussion that are never said, you know, or not commonly opened up in public about vengeance about how we move on in the aftermath of terrible things happening nationally. So that's, yeah, that's the production history. And we were set to go to the Edinburgh Festival. And Lindi Chibi³, who played Electra, and is one of the most talented artists I've ever worked with was shot by her domestic partner. And after two years, she passed away from being bedridden. And I, we did, I did then manage, you know, I recast the role. But that seemed to be very embedded in part of the textures of South Africa at some level, you know, as is always the case, when you're creating theatre in South Africa, the stuff that sits on the periphery is as much about what's happening in the work and somehow a reflection of what you're trying to articulate in the work.

Fleishman:

Can you just expand a little bit on the cast beyond the chorus? And can you talk about who the different performers were?

Farber:

Mark, we're talking about (*laughs*) over a decade, 15 years ago-

Fleishman:

[*inaudible due to computer glitch*]

Farber:

Lebogang Elephant was in the role of Orestes. At the Court, there was just Clytemnestra, Electra, Orestes, and that was Dorothy Ann Gould played Clytemnestra, Lindi Chibi played Electra and Lebogang played Orestes. And then I had to recast Dot⁴ at one stage when we went to Japan, so Jennifer Steyn took over the role of Clytemnestra.

Fleishman:

Umm, and you did also go to Oxford, I think.

Farber:

Yes. Sorry, I'm forgetting I mean, I should have refreshed my history on *Molora*. Yes, we went to Oxford Playhouse. We went to the Barbican in London. We went to - I can pull it up on my bio⁵. It's got all the touring places that we went to, but we had quite an extensive international life for the production.

Fleishman:

Okay, can we talk about language. So the play, obviously the chorus are singing and I'm assuming they're singing - what language are they singing in, I'm assuming isiXhosa...

³ Lindiwe Chibi.

⁴ Dorothy Ann Gould.

⁵ <http://www.yfarber.com/molora>

Farber:

Yes.

Fleishman:

And then the actors are speaking in English right?

Farber:

In English and isiXhosa and Setswana. Lebogang would sometimes go into, into Tswana. Lindy would speak in Xhosa, and the women spoke in Xhosa. So yeah, those are- and English sorry. And English was a, you know, the main language between the three of them.

Fleishman:

So can you talk about how these different languages operate in your opinion in the production? I mean, in the sense that, really for a lot of the audience inside and outside of South Africa, it's the English text that's understandable on a narrative level, but the other languages are obviously operative in a different way.

Farber:

Yeah. It's very powerful what language does because well, first of all, the Orestes and Electra only speak to each other in vernac⁶, and they speak in English to their mother. And, and this is important in terms of how language operates in South Africa and what we are unable – or what we have denied ourselves access to, in many ways as white people, if we ... if, you know, at every level if we were not encouraged to or had the will to learn any of the vernacular languages. But it is also about, I think where an experience as theatregoers is always about the predominant language being an unconscious *fait accompli*, when you are suddenly witnessing action that you can follow, but you're not able to access the detail of language. There is an experience, an insight that one gains into not having the central position of your language being the form of communication that's being used. So it's a delicate balance as a director to keep people just inside that experience without alienating them. So that the action compels and that what is happening is human enough and authentic enough that the audience feels deeply connected. But just alienated enough to know what colonisation feels like. You know, that it's important that we, that we understand what it means to, to be denied the detail of one's own language as the central position. And then the choices of the different languages, you know, it was very often - I mean, in the rehearsal room, I was, you know, a director who pursues authentic impulse before anything. So, you know, for Lebo to speak Setswana on impulse in certain moments where they're incanting, and they're kind of psyching themselves up to, with, you know, during a kind of call refrain with the gods, to find the courage to kill their mother. It just naturally would sometimes go into his first language and I didn't make intellectual decisions about that. I move with the actors in the room, I'm very much someone who works with, you know, it's bespoke to the people who are in the room and the way that they can access primary impulses. But I also wanted it to have an inclusivity so that we didn't sequester it off into a corner of this being about Xhosa culture. And that it had a wider frame. There were times even when Lindy uses isiZulu, that's her, that was her first language. Or she, you know, she was a multilingualist, as

⁶ vernacular

many South Africans are. But it was also about the fascinating tapestry of what was happening in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission trials where people were, you know, telling their deepest truths and recounting trauma. And then there is, you know, a translator, so, there are times where things are happening in reaction. So the premise is, you know, Clytemnestra and Electra are meeting over these tables, and addressing each other about the past and when they get out from behind the tables this is where they enter memory, and the place where their lives, intermingled in the past. One of the things that struck me very deeply in Antjie Krog's book '*Country of my Skull*',⁷ she managed to portray or at least convey to us as a witness of those trials, the incredible intimacy between tormentor and survivor that there is, enormous uncomfortable intimacy and familiarity. And so, the kind of invasive abandoning nature of the Clytemnestra/Electra dynamic struck me as very articulate in terms of this sort of ... how fascism works and how it worked in our country and the invasive nature of, of how violence was used. So, getting back to language, Tsolwana⁷, he came with the group, he is part of the group, he was the one male member of the chorus, he would turn and he was literally my translator, that was my way of being able to speak to the women, and this is what I mean about how the meta dramaturgy in South African rehearsal rooms is always... I often feel like someone should be making a piece of work about the making of work in South Africa, because it just shimmers outward in so many layers. But he was my access, linguistically to the women, and he turns to the chorus often and translates what Clytemnestra is saying in English. But when Electra is speaking, this is not necessary. So there's, yeah, there's layers of how when language is taken from being the central position in a country, what that does psychically. I mean, you know all the stuff that one will read, you know, about what that does to the colonised population, but at the same time, the preservation of that language in South Africa by some, you know, perhaps unintended neglect from the system, that language survived, and this makes subversion possible. This makes planning possible this makes secrets possible. So, yeah.

Fleishman:

So it seems to me that, that there is a particular theatricality at work in the production. So can we talk a little bit about that staging concept, you've mentioned a bit about the tables, the microphones, the technologies at work, but also, I think that the languages also work as a kind of texturing device in the space that makes the production feel very South African, even, or African, if you like, but particularly South African in many ways, but also being able to resonate beyond that. Can you talk a bit about that?

Farber:

Yeah, so you mean the theatrical elements themselves?

Fleishman:

Yeah.

Farber:

Yeah. So it's this bringing together of different technologies like in Grahamstown when we were in the hall, you know, how some of the festival has such a particular feeling. It was not unlike any hall that would be used for the TRC hearings. Which is a different experience to us being in The Pit, in the

⁷ Tsolwana B. Mpayipheli.

Barbican, which is a perfect black box theatre. But when we were at Kampnagel, you know, it's an old ammunition factory, and there are still bullet holes in the walls behind the women. So the environment is very important, and the richer that environment was, the better. When we were at Oxford Playhouse we stripped the stage entirely and the audience were on the stage. Absolutely critical is the eradication wherever possible, and in international touring it's not always possible, but it's always to the great cost of the work. If you cannot eliminate the proscenium arch, if you cannot bring the audience onto the stage. Because it just inevitably creates a voyeuristic dynamic. And the thing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is that it wasn't you know, come and pay 30 pounds or 10 rand, or whatever it is to come and watch people have a catharsis on your behalf. It was a very modest ritual that was being performed, which I think is why in many ways it was politically so unsatisfying for so many people. But there was a kind of ritualistic technology at work that sits very close for me to what theatre is, or the kind of theatre that I'm interested in making, and certainly connects with the ancient traditions of theatre.

The work begins with these neon lights going on overhead. That sort of harsh fluorescent lighting that just blows out atmosphere, neon light - what do we call them in South Africa? I forget now...

Fleishman:

Neon.

Farber:

Neons, yeah.

Fleishman:

Fluorescents.

Farber:

Fluorescents, yeah. And you know, it's so anti-theatre in a way as soon as you put them on you lose all this kind of subtlety. So you know, there would be this moment of kind of awful exposure in the theatre and then we would gently kind of, you know, just for dramatic purposes have to kind of pull it back in. But, the use of the herb *impepho*, being burned by Orestes when he comes home for the first time; goes to his father's grave, and speaks to his ancestors. Now I think, *impepho* and different rituals, this is this fine line of when one is using sacred, sacred - I keep wanting to use the word technologies - sacred means within theatres where people are coming to watch, and that's why the elimination of the proscenium arch is so important. That's why context is so important. But Lebo had to be very connected to this. So you know, at times actors will sometimes use their own praise names as they're calling up their ancestors. And this is always something that I understand I don't fully understand, but that is a part of a choice that the actor will make. So it's these, it's the dissolve of the line between theatre and ritual, between catharsis for our community, like the Truth [and Reconciliation Commission] - there was a performative aspect to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, not by the people who were doing it, they were in the worst or most significant moments of their lives. But for the rest of us witnessing, we were gaining something from this, from the witnessing, and those being witnessed, we're gaining something. Although I worked with Duma Kumalo, who was one of the Sharpeville Six, we created a piece about his experiences of almost being executed on South Africa's death row. And he had great contempt for the hearings, and for the inadequacy of the experience and of the compensation, but his drive to be heard was

everything. And so I understand this to be the dynamic at play. So the different theatrical elements, it's to keep it as raw as possible, as close to the community hall feeling as possible. But to create something theatrically deeply compelling, and that takes a particular kind of alchemy, especially when you're touring internationally and are not always in control of the configuration of the space, what the lights are, that are available, what the audience's response is, how disinvested they are or are not. So yeah, and then the use of the women's, the way the women in the Ngqoko Cultural group use their instruments. The theatrical elements of that: to hear the milking drum, to hear the water in the bowl as Ma Nofenishala⁸ would be wetting her hands to wet the stick, to make the drum resonate. These are all things that I think we can contrive in theatre, to try to create an immersive experience. But it was all there. It was all you know, it's just about curating what the audience should pay attention to. That that was my job, to create enough space for these details to be available to the audience. Yeah, there's lots Mark. I mean, the other thing I want to say is Ma Nofenishala, she has since passed away, she was in my production of *Les Blancs* in London and three of the ladies came out - of the women - came out to join us for the production of *Les Blancs* in London, which is another story altogether. But she was a spiritual diviner. So she at the end, where the children choose not to kill Clytemnestra, which is (*chuckles*) the story I will need to tell you, but when they choose not to, she would go into this prayer. And it was something she naturally did on the day that the ending was discovered in the room. And so the line, she used her own praise names going into that prayer, she would pray for South Africa, she would, you know, and she was using her stick, a stick that she would divine with and sort of swinging the stick in a particular way. And bringing us all into a commonality of experience that I remember, even in Germany, people were able to experience the technology of that, and this all has to be held within the theatrical frame of lighting and sound. And I think the ethics of this is always very, very, *very* delicate, it's extremely delicate. So that's another rabbit hole we could go down, but I won't unless you need me to.

Fleishman:

But let's go back to the change in ending. So, clearly the play starts off with *The Oresteia* as the basic premise and in *The Oresteia*, clearly, Orestes is in a sense driven to kill his mother, to avenge his father and Electra eggs him on along the way, and eventually they do this actual thing, and then they're pursued by the Furies and they get to a point where Athena steps in as a kind of *deus ex machina* and says, "Stop this cycle of violence", right? So can you discuss how you changed the ending? And what the reasoning was behind that?

Farber:

Yes, you know, I was working with the text as it is. And had not at that point, even necessarily correlated this intervention of Athena. It was quite simply, we were working on the story, but I had told the women when I'd gone to meet them in the Transkei, that Orestes has to kill his mother. And then when we were rehearsing, I was under, as we always are tremendous pressure, I was creating this from scratch, I had five weeks, you know. And Mama Nosomething⁹ came up to me and said, "Umntanum ..." ¹⁰ she's speaking through the translator, "I have to have a conversation with you, we need to understand something". So I said, "Yes" and (*chuckles*) I went over to the corner, and we sat

⁸ Nofenishala Mvotyó.

⁹ Nosomething Ntese.

¹⁰ isiXhosa word loosely translating to 'my child'.

down, and she said, "Look", and it was very particular, I knew when they would address me as a child, in a sense, it was like we need to guide you in this moment. There's a conversation that needs to be had. "We can't let him kill his mother". And I said, "Well, that's the script". And she said, "Yeah, but we can't do that". So now I've got a real problem on my hands (*laughs*) because that's how it was written. And of course, you can hear the metaphor that's evolving here, you know, and I was aware of it, but not in real time. I was kind of, yes, because I was under a lot of pressure and I was like, "Okay, I completely understand, but let's stage it, because there is a redemptive quality that comes in in the end, there's a lesson that is learned from all of this". But what Mama Nosomething was trying to explain to me was that I was asking them to do something that they just couldn't get behind (*laughing*). So, I heard but as a director does you kind of go okay, how can I kind of organise this that it still runs along the track that it needs to, especially because I've got to hit a deadline. So we get to the day where we're going to stage the scene. And I had in my version Lindy grabbing – Electra - grabbing the axe out of Orestes' hesitant hands and running at her mother. So that the two of them are kind of in the dilemma and I wanted to sort of capture this moment - sorry Mark, what I hadn't said was that it wasn't just the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that struck me as so different to the Bush administration's response to 9/11. But it was also, obviously, this moment that in many ways we were all bracing for in the 90s, in South Africa, where it's like, what's going to happen when democracy comes? It's an entirely legitimate possibility that there could be a civil war, some kind of bloodbath, you know, fear of this self-fulfilling prophecy that has been generated by the system. And that transition, having been one of a kind of, certainly in the moment, at that time, historically, and led by a certain kind of leadership, it enabled some kind of transcending of that moment, away from a very different, I can't say ending, but new beginning. And so we sat there discussing this, and then we said, okay, we're going to stage it and as Lindy grabbed the axe out of - as Electra grabbed the axe from Orestes' hands and was running at Clytemnestra, the women just ran in, and they were all women in their 60s, some of them in their 70s; grabbed the pick-axe out of her hand, and just grabbed her and went down. And were all cradling her, which again, made like the perfect image when one is looking as a director, and were just holding her and praying and then Ma Nofenishala, she just got up and she started swinging her stick, and she started praying for all of us. And it sort of went into a much larger level and, and I was like, alright, we're changing the script. And that's kind of what happens, you either follow the ancient scripts of an eye for an eye, or you're in a convoluted way achieving what, what *The Oresteia* was seeking to do, which is this deep examination of justice, this deep examination of vengeance. And it was organically compressed and reformed by the women in a way that expanded outward to articulate realities about our country. And I'm aware that in the aftermath now it can almost seem a bit sentimental (*chuckles*), you know, but at the time, there was, I don't mean, their choice was sentimental, I mean, to speak about that transition in our country having been miraculous, because, of course, there are many, many challenges the country has faced since. But I think we do forget how different a way it could have taken in that moment, you know, just how violent the transition could have been. And then I was able to go home and just write the final monologue for Clytemnestra where she says, that we're still only here by grace alone. And, look, now this house rises up, great chains on the home are falling off. For too long, it has lain in ash on the ground. And that's where I sort of tried to bring in the theme of destruction and how it stays with us until we address it. So again, the kind of colliding of reality, of technologies. And it was not always that I was able to get these technologies to survive, or not to survive, but to kind of braid, as I say, in the way that I would like to, depending on the venues we went to, but that's what you just strive for as a director. But it reshapes the ethics every time you're

in a new space in a new audience, whether the audience are allowed to eat chocolates while they're watching. It's like all of these things that change the mandate of the work.

Fleishman:

Was there any laughter in the production?

Farber:

In our rehearsal room or when people were watching?

Fleishman:

No, in the production itself.

Farber:

You mean when it was being performed?

Fleishman:

Yeah, I mean, in the sense that we often make these very hard distinctions of genres like tragedy is the serious one where people die and comedy is the light-hearted one where people fall in love and live forever.

Farber:

Right. I mean, in South Africa, there was some laughter. You know, that amazingly complicated, layered relationship with laughter. That I think is available to communities as its own kind of instrument of survival. But whereas in some of my other work, where I've found laughter to be quite shocking at times less so in *Molora*, there was less laughter in *Molora*, I think there was something about the presence of the women. They bring a gravitas that just can't be... but when they would choose to, Mama Nosomething, she had a kind of, ... she's also since passed, but she had a kind of almost jester quality about her, so with like a small little sort of shift of her head or something, she could bring the audience into a kind of an affection with the women, and I'd set them up as the women who take Orestes away and raise him until his circumcision. And until he's ready to go back and claim what is his. But yes, I mean, always, there's some of that laughter. But less so, I'd say, than in some of the other productions that I've done dealing with very grave stuff.

Fleishman:

And do you think that there is a difference between tragedy as a particular genre, and the concept of the tragic more broadly, and that, in some ways, the tragic can be seen as a way of framing or a lens through which to look at everyday life as it unfolds in all its dimensions? Particularly where we come from.

Farber:

Yeah, I think that that's what I felt most, that I realised shaped me as a person and as a director. I mean, again, Mark, who knows who we would be if we were born in another country. Because, you know, in particular my father's family's relationship with the Holocaust. It was very seldom spoken about, but his parents had got out but everybody else had died in Lithuania. So there was a kind of texture, there was a particular texture, a relationship to tragedy that I think became a way that I

metabolised, that I still metabolise things, but may not have had the same kind of bandwidth for me as what was absolutely the framework with which I saw our country from when I was a child. And I think most of us unconsciously, do actually have that experience. You know, wherever we are conditioned, or however, we are conditioned to metabolise that. We understand it begins more at the grave than at the cradle. Somehow, you know, there's something. So, I think of everything that I'm interested in watching theatrically, and it's about the truths that begin at the graveside. Sort of quite literally, *Molara* is - the mise-en-scène - it's a grave, and there are two tables and the grave between them is the wound, it's the rupture. I think that South Africa is a very particular place. And that I think makes our relationship to tragedy more conscious in a way than other nations. Currently I've just done a *Hamlet* in Ireland - well, a year and a half ago, but we just had it in New York - and Ruth Negga played Hamlet in the production, and as a black woman or mixed race woman, Ethiopian-Irish woman playing Hamlet, I was just struck by how the conversations in the room because of the kind of trauma that the world has been going through, and this was pre-pandemic, but you know the various foundations of the largest liberal democracy in the world being shaken. You know, the political tides in Europe and in England and the rise of populism. There was a, I felt more like I was in a South African rehearsal room than I have for a while. Where you start to see how tragedy is rising more consciously in the world, or that the premise is we are in the genre of tragedy (*chuckles*) at the moment. And I think that all of us are so seasoned in it in South Africa. And I always say, it's as much the utterly apolitical theatre that you know, we were all seeing in South Africa unless we went to the Market Theatre. And then at some point, you realise nothing is apolitical, it is impossible to do apolitical theatre, if you're doing something that isn't speaking about what's happening. That is a curated choice. So at every level we are framed within the tragedy that is unfolding. But of course, I'm exposing a worldview here as much as I am, you know, I'm speaking about what I understand to be, what theatre is for. You know, people are constantly saying to me, when are you going to do a comedy? And I'm like, why would (*laughs*) I do a comedy? I mean, I love a great laugh. And most people who know me say like, it's just amazing that, you know, it's predominantly what I do with the people I love is laugh. But it doesn't hold any particular interest to me in theatre, laughter for itself. But the kind of laughter you were talking about earlier, that is implicit to tragedy, that's interesting to me. Beckett is very funny, because it's tragic.

Fleishman:

Okay, just a couple of more questions, if you don't mind, the one is to is about the response. And the difference that there might have been between South African audiences and international audiences. We can start there.

Farber:

There was a difference, depending on how much proximity audiences had to - Okay, hang on, is that true? I was about to say, because I'm remembering the night in Germany, where there was a visceral response, that I would kind of connect with the history of that country. But then again, when I think about how it was received in London... no, still it... I feel like in societies that have had national trauma or have been at the coalface of their own evil capacities, or they have understood that we begin with the grave, not the cradle. The work undoubtedly resonated at an emotional level, in those communities where the work was shown. But, like in London, people received it as successful - whatever that means - not successful as in big box office, because we were just in The Pit, and we were only there for about three weeks. But as a successful rendering, of being spare and savage

enough to do justice to Greek tragedy. So it was more about the theatrical endeavour of unlocking the mystery of what tragedy is that some theatrical, some theatregoing communities were taken by. Whereas in South Africa, that night in in Germany, because we only showed the show a couple of nights there, and that was the night of the post-show conversation. These were the communities where I felt something was at stake for them, they were in the room with us literally and figuratively.

Fleishman:

And then, finally, if you don't mind, coming back to the thorny issue you raised around ethics. So we all face this in our theatre making practices as white theatre directors working with mixed casts or black cast members. So there's two levels of this right. There's the level of the power relations that obviously operate within processes which are not monolithic because quite clearly what you're describing here is that it was your project, *you* had put this group together, *you* were the director of the group. On a generational basis, the chorus, who could have been considered to be the least powerful, given that they were less literate in the theatre world, not able to speak English, which was the dominant language of the process, etc, etc, that because of their age, they gained a lot of power in certain moments, to the extent that they changed the ending of the play. So I don't want to kind of overdetermine that particular thing, but I think we have to acknowledge the racial dynamics that operate in every aspect of life in South Africa, not least, the making of theatre. So that's one side of it. And the other side of it, of course, is the question of tradition and culture and language. So clearly how language is used and where languages are allowed to be used and where languages are silenced, even in the process, because as you said, you have to keep it within the bounds of understandability- so you don't alienate the audience who are likely not to be speakers of those vernacular languages necessarily, in all cases. But on the other hand, you've got the use of these traditions, these spiritual traditions, which are often things that are not meant to be played with in a particular way or used in a representational sense. Yeah. So can you, you know, you said, it's a very fine line and needs to be treated very carefully. Do you want to just unpack that a little bit more?

Farber:

Absolutely. Um, Mark, I think it's about understanding that we don't understand entirely what we are working with. And that it's actually interesting. I mean, I think it's even coming up now, very strongly in post the 'Me Too movement'. How do we have rehearsal spaces, in which we retain what I consider to be the sacred mandate of creating work, which is authenticity, which is that whatever happens in a room that was a transmission between us as a group will become the transmission in the auditorium. If we go through something as a group, they will go through something as we perform it. So we can lead, ... we, as in how I would speak to the actors, or we as the creative endeavour, gain the authority to lead audiences each night, through an experience that we have now travelled, as an authentic and effective tool or means of a kind of surgery for the people who will witness it. Surgeries are not the greatest word to use, but a process, a process. And this comes down for me to every rehearsal room I'm in but it's like everything with South Africa, because we are fired in a very hot kiln. You know, as clay we understand things or don't at our peril. We have to reckon with these things early, rather than being blindsided by them later in our work. Although I think we have to understand that it's probably inevitable that we will, part of not knowing is to be consistently blindsided by things that we couldn't have anticipated. So, I think the answer to that always for me, is, is not an answer, but an approach. And that approach is always that I'm not cherry picking things ... I can feel when I'm watching as a director, and something becomes compelling

theatrically. And that it kind of stores in my brain somewhere that this is part of what we do, we're curating an experience for the audience, that it stores in my brain as something to be seen, rather than participated in. And I think when actors understand that they are actually leading an audience through something rather than being... it's like inverting that relationship, exactly what you just described about the hierarchy in terms of the chorus. It's inverting the relationship so that the actor has an experience, an experiential understanding every day in the room, that they are the people in the society who've decided to be the ones that take us down to the pits of ourselves. I don't know if you've read Anne Carson's *Tragedy: A Curious Art Form*? Have you read her introduction to her *Hippolytus*¹¹ - it's extraordinary and I read it to every cast I work with. But it is to say, to act is not to pretend it's to take action on behalf of us who dare not to, because we work in banks or in hospitals or raising our children. So do it for us. And when actors understand that, then I think there is, it's an ongoing question of them trusting that you are again bringing them along on something that they open themselves to. Still nonetheless, being voyeured. I mean, these cross lines into the testimonial theatre I've done as well is, to what degree is one trafficking in grief, for 15 pounds, and you know, and it always comes down for me to the consistent communication in that room, between me as a director, and the company, in that we know why we're there every day, that we understand what the endeavour is, and that we can easily get lost in what happens when you start to tour when, you know, we can lose each other in different ways. But if there is a sense of purpose and a sense of understanding as a director, that you're asking to be led into understanding something so that it may be used in service to this mandate. So it all comes back to the mandate, so that we can put on a great show, and people can come and pay money, and we get to stay in great hotel rooms, or shitty hotel rooms or whatever the thing may be, it's like, to not lose sight of why we're there. And to maintain that trust with a company. And very often that trust, if you find yourself in a situation where that trust is irreparable, just culturally already, which I think is the kind of crossroads that we're all coming to in different ways, who has the right to tell which stories etc, etc, I think we're going to have to go through this period of time where we can explore and experience and finally return back to being in service to something and I think that's again, about a style of leadership. And I'm not saying I always get it right, but I know what I'm always aspiring to. And that is to facilitate rather than to lead, to create the ground for an invitation for as much authenticity as possible, not so that I can use your own authenticity, or that the theatre can use your authenticity, but so that you are to understand you are best equipped to lead us through this experience as an audience, so that we can get back in touch with things that we've lost sight of. And that comes down to what Peter Brook writes a lot about, which is ritual. We've lost, he says something very beautiful I saw it in an interview somewhere, he says, over the centuries the orphic wine, sorry, the orphic wines have been sullied drop by drop until all we had is the gala evening¹². I slightly paraphrased at the end, I'll send you the quote. But we've lost sight of what it is and I'm lucky to have grown up in a country where I was living alongside a majority of people who still understand how crucial and central the role of ritual is. And I am someone who still wants the orphic wines, rather than the gala evening and entertainment, that's the theatre I'm interested in creating. And when you cast that mandate out into the room, there will always be those who don't, that ethically they or, you know, on whatever level, it's not their path, or they will find that suspicious. And I think that there's value in those perspectives, I just can't create theatre like that. I remember when I was working with Duma Kumalo

¹¹ Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides by Ann Carson.

¹² "Over the centuries the Orphic Rites turned into the Gala Performance—slowly and imperceptibly the wine was adulterated drop by drop" (Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, p. 52).

and I was at a conversation and some of the, one of the journalists raised the question about who are you to be telling that story? It's that ... it's the question we all have to be facing, And Duma cut in, and he said, but I wanted her to be working with me to tell the story. And he said, she wasn't using me, I was using her. You know, we both laughed, and we had a great love between us. But this is really my understanding ... is to try and create the parameters in which you can facilitate an exercise and yes, curate. And this is where it becomes, you know, full of shadow. But curate an experience for an audience where the highest authority in that room is the authenticity of the people who have chosen this as the mandate for why they are in theatre. And again, I'm curating who's in the room. It's people who hold the same kind of belief in theatre as I do. And it's whether I'm working in India, or London, or New York, or wherever I'm working with a group, with sexual violence survivors, I'm trying to establish an environment in which you bring what you have - your truth. Can you entrust me with the capacity to curate an evening, that that truth comes to the fore and is able to lead us through an evening that can transform us? It's a big mandate. It's quite grandiose for all of us as an endeavour, but it's the only way I know how to still engage in theatre, in what I believe it's true technology is and in a way that is not compromising people as we do it.

Fleishman:

Thank you very much.

Farber:

You're welcome Mark.