

Horizon Radio: Grief & Belonging Transcript

Hello and welcome to Horizon Radio. Horizon is a new international performing arts showcase at the Edinburgh festivals. Horizon Radio is a chance to delve deeper into the practice of the showcase artists and get to know them better. What you are about to hear is a conversation between artists Sonia Hughes and the vacuum cleaner, hosted by Dr Natasha Davis, exploring grief and belonging. We hope you enjoy listening.

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Natasha: Hello, everyone. This is Horizon Radio a series of four recorded discussions around topics that run through the work in our showcase and this particular episode is about grief and belonging. The past decade has of course marked pretty big crisis of increased instability in the UK and around the world. Our recent lives have definitely been marked by the austerity of the s the unprecedented levels of human displacement and escalating climate emergency. Specific to the UK context is Brexit, the hostile environment the new Anti-Refugee Bill, some recent events such as the Grenfell Tower, Windrush Generations' struggle to demonstrate their lawfully immigration status in the UK.

In addition, of course something that we share with the rest of the world the recent epidemic of Covid. These are just issues among the long list of many other events that marked the decade such as the murder of George Floyd, withdrawal from Afghanistan, war in Ukraine, the #MeToo movement and the list goes on. It's a continuous line of challenges and definitely we are not short in this past decade of various events that bring our capacity to endure grief and perhaps challenge the notions around where and what we belong to.

My name is Natasha Davis. I'm a performance and visual artist creating work in performance, installation, film and publication, making interdisciplinary work exploring autobiography, fantasy, research and technology, and I have a huge honour and pleasure to have with us today as part of the Horizon Radio series two amazing artists exploring these issues that I mentioned alongside many other issues and they're both bringing their work to Edinburgh this summer. The artists are some Sonia Hughes and James Leadbitter.

Sonia is currently an associate artist to Festspillene i Nord-Norge in Norway. She was a long-time collaborator with Quarantine. She wrote Jeremy Deller's Manchester International Festival opening event 'What is the City, but the People'. Her current work, which is coming to Edinburgh. 'I am from Reykjavik' is an outdoor, live installation. This work marks out new territory for Sonia exploring complex big ideas working in simple and direct ways with audience as co-creators.

James Leadbitter or the vacuum cleaner is the UK-based artist and activist making candid provocative and playful work. In his own words, James wants to find better ways to go mad. During on his own experience of mental health disability, he works with groups, including young people, health professionals and vulnerable adults to challenge how mental health is understood, treated and experienced.

And without further ado I'll turn to Sonia first. Sonia if you could tell us - welcome, thank you for joining us today - And if you could tell us a little bit about the work you're bringing to Edinburgh this summer and tell us maybe in that context how you explore home in your work. What does home mean to you? Where is home for you? And what makes you wish to explore the ideas around home?

Sonia: Well, really simply I just arrive in a place with bits of wood which are very carefully engineered and not so random as bits of woods and I build myself - I'm not quite sure what to call it yet, maybe a dwelling, sometimes I call it or shack or temporary home - in a space and and I find it quite hard to say what it is. But it for me okay for me, for me it is, I'm trying to feel at ease and we could say at home. But feel at ease in any place. I noticed, I've noticed for a long time and becoming increasingly notice that I do a lot of things to make it okay for everybody else that I'm around. And I don't want to do it anymore. So I it's just to say right I'm here. It's just that, I'm here. And for me in myself to feel okay about I'm here and to try not to do all the sort of appeasing of a space or lessening of myself or yeah a squashing or a... And I think we all do this in certain ways to fit in. We'll do these things. But I'm done now. I can't do it anymore. I'm not doing it. I don't want to do it. And so it's an attempt to feel at ease, which could be at home. And I don't know really what home is I don't I don't. I don't know what home is. I think it's not a place. It's more an inside feeling rather than a definite location. I don't, I'm not attached to a piece of land or location.

Natasha: And since you've decided that you are done with adjusting have you noticed any difference in how the reaction of the outside world is to you? Because the piece is durational, is that correct?

Sonia: Yeah

Natasha: And it's participatory, so people, do people have a conversation with you during the piece? Yes. How does that dynamic of you finding that feeling in yourself and making the decision has that created a shift in the communication with with the world outside or or not?

Sonia: Not yet. I think it's a really long process it. I mean it has in some ways. In some ways I am more a-tune, I'm more a-tune to what I don't like. It's not that I worked out how to deal with it yet, but I'm like, oh this person's come in actually, I don't want to speak to them. How do I do that? But I sort of I still carry on. But and now and then I think, oh. It's not, I don't want to be inhospitable. That's not my thing I'm not an inhospitable person, but I don't but there's things I no longer want to put up with. I suppose the thing for me and maybe in the stage of becoming aware of all those, more aware of, hyper aware of all those things.

But the conversations with people are sometimes absolutely beautiful, but Mmm, spot on. It was what they needed, it's what I need. A lot of people it's like oh, okay. Well done. But

um, and for some people we talk about all sorts of things that I sometimes. I've asked people sometimes - women a lot or women appearing people - if they're scared. and I will talk about love a lot and being visible and what is gonna come next? What do we what are we aiming for? We know what we don't want. What do we want what we want? How will it be? So those conversations are nice and then some people I think uhh I have a strategy now. I just lie down. Oh, okay. I don't want to speak to someone. There's nothing here for me. Okay. I'm out. Bye. That's my strategy. It sounds terrible doesn't it as an audience member that, and you might get it wrong. But but that's kind of part of the thing. It's kind of part of the thing. You might get it wrong. I'm not getting it. Yeah, I've done all the getting it wrong and trying to get in. You try it. Maybe.

Natasha: And explaining. Thanks Sonia. I really appreciate it. I really appreciate that fresh look at the you know, participatory conversation and work with audiences. James also creates a lot of, the vacuum cleaner work has been executed in direct relationship and mixing with the environment and people. James, would you like to tell us a little bit about what you're bringing to Edinburgh? And also, you know how you work with the audience in terms of conversation, participation and yeah, I think the work you're bringing to Edinburgh is specifically about Covid, you know personal response to Covid-19 crisis. Would you like to tell us a little bit about it?

James: Nah!

Natasha: I was just going to say Sonia created a really dangerous precedent for our podcast conversations!

James: I think also but it's interesting actually this thing Sonia you were saying about the ability to lie down and feel safe lying down. And and for me that is a sense of that's when I feel at home when I can lie down and I don't feel in danger. Is something about that that is that resonates for me that. And I'm interested how that will be for you in Edinburgh. Whether that will be possible or not. And I know you don't know the answer, but I'm just I just might check in with you later about how that's been and whether you have been able to lie down in Edinburgh or not, you know, yeah.

So we're bringing this evening called 'Exposure' and after the first wave of the Covid - I filmed health workers that work in the London borough of Newham. So they came to my studio and we had a conversation that was filmed. I asked them a series of quite simple questions and that particular part of London it's quite a unique place in that it's got one of the youngest populations in the country it is 72% like non-Anglo white. Something like 217 languages spoken and it had the highest Covid death rate in Europe at that point in time.

So this evening, I worked with this really phenomenal performer/ designer/ puppeteer called Sascha Gilmore, and we've kind of taken some of those questions and we're sharing some of the responses to those questions as well as thinking about what a kind of trauma

informed space to bear witness to these stories could be like. So you watch some of the interviews, but you also get a lot of holding in that space which is done through the making of landscapes and soundscapes and a lot of sensory play so there's a lot of things to do with your hands and smell and taste during it. And it's something like that I think.

Natasha: Thank you

James: I don't know. I have no control over it and I'm terrified of it.

Natasha: Thank you. Both of you work with communities and so sometimes it's specific community like you've just described James for a specific reason, often it's just communities that you find in the place where you are performing or interacting with people. What is why working with, why working in that way? Specifically, we think about the issues that you are exploring. I think Covid crisis all I mean Covid-19 led itself to it and I can see how you know just the power of the community, the stories coming from the community versus one person's experience. But I'm curious to hear from both of you why the community where is the impulse? And where is the why work with something that is so unpredictable?

James: Well conflict is the foundation of all drama. So unpredictability makes for good drama. You know, that's the industry we're in and people are really fascinating and people have incredible knowledge and I sat you know, I've got hours of footage from these people. Who yes, they've shared their experience of you know, quote-on-quote being on the front line of the pandemic, but also they also shared their stories of who they are and what you know brought them to be in that situation and why they chose to work in healthcare and how they feel about health inequalities and how they feel those health inequalities could be challenged and resolved and worked through and how they are and that their dignity in their out, you know this rage about that they have and this profound sense of solidity that they have with each other.

So it's really humbling to be in a space with that and it's I think in particularly in the UK maybe it's the same in Brazil and the USA but I think particularly when the narrative of our government is one that is just an outright lie it's really important that there is a narrative existing that counters that narrative, you know, we're told that we have to learn to live with Covid and I can't. I can't learn to live with what's happened. It's and those people can't learn to live with what they've been through. They are you know, they're morals are injured and they've lost a lot of people so it's my responsibility as an artist to hold space for that. I think. Or try to anyway, I don't if I can I don't know how to but you know at this invitation was made to me and so give it a go.

Natasha: Thank you, James. Sonia.

Sonia: I don't know that I think I did it. I don't think I work with specific communities really. The work that I'm doing now is I just arrive somewhere and something happens with this project. So I mean I try and choose where it is so that there is some interest for me as to how is that, how would it be for me to be there present for myself, not for them for myself. But I think, I think work just and the idea of working with people that it you know, there's a continuum of co-creation, I'm not saying that mine is sort of the lower grade end, but it's kind of because it's happened stance thing. So I'm not. That's why it's all a bit vague. I'm saying what I'm saying.

Okay. So this place when I went I did it in SPILL in Ipswich and I chose this the location because I thought here is where people gather. It seems to be that these are where the new arrivals to or newish arrivals to Britain, and over there it seems to be where the alcoholics hang out. And bear in mind I've done it at St Pauls so it flash and I'm trying to just do it in different places and I thought this could go really badly. Or it could go really well. And actually, it went for me it went really well. For say, maybe, the intentional audience it didn't go so well. But for me and the people were there it was great because we had a we had a great time together these bunch of kids who are children of immigrants like me but new, new immigrants and they we just built the thing and I think intentional audience found it slightly frustrating because they couldn't see the lady. They couldn't see the pretty lady making the house but this is great, me and these kids are making this space and their headteacher came along. And they really in big packets crisps and drinking pop. And they said oh that and he said, oh, that's very unhealthy. That's very unhealthy food and they tapped his fat belly and said, oh you can speak. I thought come on. Come on kids. We're doing this. Just like we're doing it.

Sonia: But that's fantastic. And I think it goes really well with you know with the aesthetic or because it's you know, it's a makeshift project and it's a makeshift community that in a way responds to it, in a welcome space. You know, you join if you feel comfortable here and you don't have to explain it, but there is also a really love very much the playful approach to it, even though it's you know, serious subject which is being explored, which is also very characteristic of James, of the vacuum cleaner work But James, is it, is this is there playfulness in a lot of your other work that I'm aware of is very playful and exploring serious issues through using playfulness and humour is this you know, it's it does this work going in a different direction or is there a playfulness in approach to it as well this time?

James: Um, there are jokes in it. Like we had to put some jokes in there because it's you know. This piece, no. Because I don't think so. It's that thing of like you can only tell a joke about something when you can take it really seriously and when you really understand the thing that you're telling the joke about and I don't feel like I or really anybody else understands what has happened around Covid like I'm still coming to terms with that so I think the piece works in a way to just hold the space to be able to think and understand what has happened. Yeah, so it is delicate in like a little macaroon or something on the tongue in that it can melt in a tender way. It don't feel like the piece I think a lot of people are frightened of the piece. A lot of people say I don't want to come see I'm frightened of it.

And when those that have been to see have gone actually there's a tenderness to it and a delicacy to it and I feel held.

But I can't compare to other things I've made, no. Because I had to, it's not my story and it's not my voice. I'm just a facilitator of other people's voices and they that's not what they were telling me. They weren't telling it in a playful way, you know, they would they were talking about some very distressing experiences. So we just had to hold it for that.

Natasha: Absolutely. Thank you both. There are so many more things that I would like to find out about, but we are running out of time, but the way to find out about more is to come and see your work in Edinburgh this summer as part of Horizon Edinburgh showcase. Thank you so much both of you to this very personal and fascinating insight into your most recent work and your practice in general and your thoughts about these two pieces of work. It has been absolute privilege talking to you and I am inspired and energized by your ideas, resilience, creativity and courage to talk about these issues through your work in this way in a very exposed way, directly with the participants in the audience and I have no doubt the audience in Edinburgh will be impressed too, and I can't wait to see the work. Thank you both so much.

James: Thank you. Awkward Zoom goodbye!

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