

Transcript of PlayCrush podcast Series 2, Episode 6 | Arinzé Kene, *The Crucible*

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Contains occasional strong language.

JOE MURPHY:

Hi everyone, and welcome to PlayCrush. It's Joe Murphy here. We have a great episode this week with the quite frankly disgustingly talented Arinzé Kene.

Arinzé is one of the most thrilling voices in theatre today. He's written six hit plays and has some extraordinary acting credits to his name, including Simba in Disney's *The Lion King*, *Been So Long* by Shay Walker at the Young Vic, *One Night in Miami* at the Donmar Warehouse, *Girl from the North Country* at The Old Vic, and *Death of a Salesman* back at the Young Vic. He's also an incredible singer, he's a two-time Olivier Award nominee - oh yeah, and he got an MBE in this year's birthday honour's list. Honestly it's enough to make you sick. To cap it all off, Arinzé is a humble, charming and deeply insightful person talking to him was an absolute dream - if I could just stop being envious for long enough.

Arinzé's play crush was *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. *The Crucible* is a 1953 play by American playwright Arthur Miller. It's a dramatized and partially fictionalized story of the Salem witch trials that took place in Massachusetts Bay Colony during 1692-93. Miller wrote the play as an allegory for McCarthyism, when the United States government persecuted people accused of being communists. Miller was questioned by the House of Representatives committee on un-American activities in 1956, and convicted of contempt of congress for refusing to identify others present at meetings he had attended. In a small tightly knit community, personal grievances collide with lust and superstition, fuelling widespread hysteria. Miller's timeless parable attacks the evils of mindless persecution and the terrifying power of false accusations. This is very much a play for our times, and it's one of my favourites so I was really excited when Arinzé chose it.

And without further ado, here is Arinzé Kene with *The Crucible*.

Hello Arinzé!

ARINZÉ KENE:

Hey, how you doing, I don't know how amazing, but how you doing? Thanks for having me on the show.

JM:

Oh man, I think pretty amazing... I have a crush on you, that's the truth of it, I always have. Saying this feels like a real creep.

AK:

You too Joe, I mean, I'm your biggest stalker.

JM:

I'm flushing!

Oh mate. Well listen, thanks so much for being with us today. Really appreciate it. So how's it been? I mean what have you been up to recently?

AK:

You know what, it's been all right man, it's been all right. We're in October 2020 and so it has been, it has been very very interesting a year for everyone, and obviously I can go into detail and would probably be speaking for about 50 years if I were to outline the many ways in which it has been a very interesting year - but I just want to say I'm healthy and I'm very grateful for the fact that I get to talk to you and still connect with my community.

JM:

Yeah, well man it's a privilege to have you on here. And how's it been, I mean, as an actor, like obviously we're hearing a lot at the moment about sort of devastation of the industry, and there are those obviously also still lucky enough to be working... are you working and if so I mean what's that been like in the sort of 'new normal'?

AK:

So, I mean I have been working, it's mainly writing you know. It's been tricky, in the beginning you know, when we didn't know how long this thing was gonna last for, or lockdown specifically, how long lockdown and quarantining, and you know the shutdown of theatres, the closing of theatres and performance spaces and film. We didn't know, and so you know, it was a bit interesting to navigate, you know.

I felt like, maybe I put a small pause on things but then I guess a couple of months in you realize that no, this is actually how things are going to be for a while and so you just have to work under these circumstances. And so I've had to adapt you know, I'm working from home, I had to learn how to work from home [they both laugh] - I've never done that before, you know, I kind of like I can revise from home you know I can kind of like polish and do little bits, but to actually properly sit down and have a proper full day of work here in the same space that I eat and like play music and watch movies, it's just always been hard, it's always been a challenge - but I've learned how to do that.

Like I said, lucky to be working, writing, working on some new material and little bits of filming as well you know, like you know well one little photoshoot, well not little, but it was it was fun, it felt little - because it was quick, you know, like with the restrictions you kind of have to be in and out, it's like you know everything's prepared before you get there and then you just do it and then you're out. But yeah, I've got a little bit of filming coming up as well so I'm looking forward to that and we've had roughly three weeks of rehearsals and it's just been lovely to be in the room with everyone.

JM:

Oh yeah that's amazing, it's so great to hear that you're busy, I mean that must be so surreal. Is everyone in masks? I too have been working from home since it's locked down, I've sort of forgotten what any kind of public space looks like, and therefore I haven't been in any workspace... but I'm imagining it's all kind of masked up and quite intense experience?

AK:

Man, it is, it is. It is masked up. I don't know why I chose to watch *Watchmen* the series while in lockdown [Joe laughs], wow, but it just feels like an extension of that, like everybody is in masks you know. The other day I was out, I went out somewhere, and I got home, and I was saying 'oh it would have been nicer to see some of the people's faces', you know, that I was just connecting you know because it wasn't until I got home that it occurred to me that I didn't know what anyone looked like... [Joe laughs loudly]... but yeah rehearsals have been have been pretty fun, masks and all, and restrictions and all and we're socially distancing. In the film I'm doing, I have a monologue and so my stuff is really quite... I don't have to touch anybody, I don't have to get close to anybody, my rehearsals have been isolated, it's just literally been me, the director and the assistant director in the room and, so yeah, that's my experience so far.

JM:

Wow, amazing. And then, talk to us, so writing is the other thing that's obviously been taking up a lot of your time. How have you found that? You know, it's interesting talking some of our other guests about like the sort of like psychological effects as well as the physical effects of COVID and lockdown, and what that can do to creativity. Have you found that inspiring, depressing, a bit of both? Like how's that affected your writing?

AK:

It's been a bit of both, so there's been a bit of a journey for the first, I would say month, it was I couldn't write at all you know, it was just about trying to stay sane and then it was about trying to figure out who I am as a as an artist... without the things that make me feel comfortable in my life. So you know with that, when everything goes to to 'ish', you know, do I still create? You know, can I kind of create from this place of frenzy, and what does come out of me? I started

journaling every day, you know, something that I had been doing but very inconsistently, and I found that form of writing was my favourite thing to do, every day and an evening as well you know.

I was reading some things that I had been putting off for a while, and then really things started getting better after a few weeks of returning to London, so I got back to London at the beginning of June, and it just took a few weeks to settle... I had to throw all my dead plants away and that was very sad because I wasn't expecting to be away for so long... and that was really sad because I had just got them from Colbia Road Market like a few weeks before I had left, and so yeah I had to dash them away. One of them survived actually, I don't know how the Snake Plant survived but it did, so if anyone's wondering about plants that can survive if you leave them alone for three months, then get a snake plant.

JM:

I mean, that's what most people actually I think have been worrying about is like what's the longest plant, that's what I'm after.

AK:

That's it, right!

JM:

Well, that's kind of interesting that it sort of pushed you into a self-reflection mode or like, a figure out who you are mode. It feels like a sort of one very small positive to be found in this kind of horrendous situation. I mean, that's an interesting question, that maybe we can just lead on to there... like who you are, where you've come from, and how...

AK:

Who am I? I don't know, I don't know who I am

JM:

Yeah I know, I mean what a question to ask, Joe, what a question. Okay listeners, sit in, we're gonna be here for about 24 hours while Arinzé tells us who he is... I guess more, but you know what I mean, like, because it's always struck me, you know, just when someone tries to define you, you pop up with something. Else. Like, oh you know Arinzé, he's that amazing actor, oh no he's not, he's a really brilliant writer, oh no he's not, he's a musician, oh no actually he's not any of those things, he's sort of quit everything and gone to Normandy... you know what I mean? It feels like there's so many facets to you, which I think is really exciting, particularly in a world, and an industry dare I say, that wants us to be one thing that people understand and can commodify in a way. So, it would just be interesting to maybe talk about that journey, like how you got into it, where all those different strands have come from and do you recognize yourself when I describe you in that like lots of different ways kind of thing? Is that something you love?

AK:

I mean, I don't recognize myself in the mirror every morning, Joe... [Joe laughs]. Yeah, I mean, I just like when people tell me what I am, I'm just... I guess, I guess.... You know, that's my answer. no, I genuinely don't know, you know. I enjoy making things from scratch, that's what I love doing, or sometimes not from scratch. I just enjoy making things and if there was one way to describe me, it's that, it's making things collaboratively, you know whether it's being asked to perform in something, or to write, or to come into a writers' session or, you know, whether it's like a musician you know who's writing something and she needs somebody to help with some lyrics... I kind of just enjoy the creative process you know, that space, and that is really, honestly, what I miss right now.

I miss the room you know, I miss the flow of being, of not knowing where you're gonna be in two months, what room you're gonna be in, whether it's a studio or on set somewhere, you know, that's the joy of it, it's just the flow. So, I do, I guess, maybe one thing that might have contributed to the fact that I feel like I just kind of turned my hand to anything creative is because of when I was growing up I was really indecisive about what I wanted to do. My dad tells this story about how when I was five, he asked me what I wanted to be, and I said I wanted to be a writer - I can't remember that - I mean, I was five [both laugh].

JM:

You were five years old and you already knew, you already knew!

AK:

Apparently. The thing is he told me that story before I had started writing as well, you know, so maybe that was maybe he made it up and he just kind of hijacked my brain, and maybe that's what happened, he instilled it, you know, by fabricating that - who knows! But apparently the first thing that I said I wanted to be was not a policeman or a fireman or a doctor or a lawyer, it was a writer, you know. And I kind of want to go back to that day, and make my dad say 'what kind of writing?', because I don't know, you know. I wasn't raised in the theatre, you know, I feel like my the first play I'd ever been to was when I went when I was 14 with my secondary school, and I *hated* it... it was mad it was honestly.... Joe! I won't lie to you, I was like this is *dead*, this is *dead*, what am I doing here?

JM:

[Laughing] Can you remember what the play was?

AK:

It was *King Lear*, and I can't remember where it was on, but it was a school trip, and I was like, you know what, I know they told us to wait, but I'm opening these Walkers crisps *now*. [They both laugh] And I was like, I can't get through this man, you know, there's just too much fake pain on the stage like what is this?? And... yeah man, I just didn't understand it. I think they threw us into the deep end, you know, well some of us...

JM:

I mean *King Lear* as a first play mate, that is that is brutal... like three and a half hours of heavy Shakespeare.

AK:

Do you know what I mean? I'm surprised that I even came back to film!

JM:

Yeah! And you'd been creative by that point, like when you're 14, were you doing other creative stuff like music or any other things, or had that stuff not really entered yet into your sort of world?

AK:

That was my world yeah, that was my weekend world. I was making music, I was singing as part of a choir, I was also singing as part of a trio, a kind of acoustic trio, kind of like, no, acapella trio... and so the whole singing thing, that was one world. And then I was also dancing, I was dancing as part of this troupe with my school at the time we were called No Limits, and some of those guys actually went on to be Flawless, you know that dance troupe that won, is it Britain's Got Talent?

JM:

Oh yeah... that's incredible.

AK:

Yeah, so when we were at school, we were we were fully on. Anyway, yeah I was doing a lot you know in the time that I had outside of school, you know, and also I was balancing basketball - I used to play a ton of basketball as well. And so there was all this stuff that I was doing...

JM:

I'm starting to see the indecisive bit here... there's a huge amount going on!

AK:

Madness, madness... it was bonkers man, there was never not something to do though, which was a joy.

JM:

Yeah, okay, so I think we're like we've got teenager Arinzé who is dancing and making music and singing and playing basketball and basically doing everything else under the sun. So how do we get to the Arinzé who's like got a massive career in theatre, like how did that happen? I mean from totally rubbish [laughing] to ending up smashing it and working in that industry, what brought you to that world in the end?

AK:

Okay... you know what, I've made a story, I guess. I've strung a bunch of moments in my life together and moments that make sense and so I can hand you this story, Joe or I could just say I don't know and the truth is there were a few opportunities that came to me, and they were random and they were quite honestly they were really random. My introduction to theatre was literally - it started raining outside, I was on my way to a basketball court to play one smer, and it was chucking it down, and then I just went into the first building nearby. And it happened to be a theatre, I happened to be 14, there happened to be loads of girls in this theatre group and they were all 14.

And you know, I was like 'Hello where have you been, and how do I join this group as a as a guy going through puberty?!' [Laughter]. I went to a boys' school, Joe, allow me, man, you know forgive me, I needed some... and my worlds were like, well you know, I've come from a very traditional Nigerian family, very masculine led family, I went to a boys school, you know, I played basketball with boys and men. My world was very manly, you know like too much, it was just too much and and I just felt like this would just gave me an option you know another kind of energy. And also I fancied like a whole bunch of them... [Joe laughs]

But, yeah, I just joined, I started hanging out... and honestly, just one thing led to another you know you start making a bit of theatre here and ther,e enjoying being on stage, like expressing yourself, you know. There was also a whole other aspect of it as well, with acceptance, you know, that I feel like was a big part of it for me, you know, it was the first time that I was making gay friends and friends from different backgrounds, you know. Two of my sisters are gay but I didn't have any of my own gay friends, you know, and am actually from a big family but I used to always be a little bit... as a young person I was always a little bit aware that I had a very singular kind of experience of the world, you know.

If I were to just continue just with basketball and with like this boys school and with whatever... I knew I needed to kind of spread my wings to meet other people from different backgrounds - and also the pressures as well of that world I just described, you know, having to be like such a man all the time you know or to pretend to be an alpha or mannish or whatever, it just really kind of is annoying, like it's an annoying kind of energy and it's a performance, it's a crappy performance, and I didn't have to do that, you know, we could just be whoever we wanted to be. Yeah, anyway, I was drawn to this world and yeah I'm grateful that it exists.

JM:

And, so then where did writing start for you?

AK:

So writing started pretty... okay, so jping ahead now, to being around 18. I was meant to go to University to study Physiotherapy. Like I said you know I'm from a

very traditional Nigerian, like family you know, and so my parents really wanted, my dad especially, really wanted me to be a doctor, a lawyer or an accountant.

JM:

And I bet they loved it that you became an actor?

AK:

Mate, mate, you don't want to open that freaking kind of worms! [Laughter] But no, they're good now, they're good now, they really support me. But yeah you know as a young person I had kind of agreed that if I am to live under your roof, parents, then I I'm gonna take your advice and, you know, we'll compromise anyway, and so the compromise, the happy medi, was that I was gonna study Physiotherapy, you know, and my dad is a massive Ma United fan, so in his dreams he was like yeah and you're obviously gonna go and work for Man United, like you know... and I was like of course dad, what else would I do?

JM:

[Laughing] 'That's all I want to do, that's all I want to do!'

AK:

Yeah, meanwhile, you know, I had other plans and I guess I had plans before I was even aware of it. But I wanted to take a gap year, and so I took a gap year, but I just wanted to really throw myself into music and performance, you know. I was in these two bands at that time, I was in a band called Yoga and I was in a band called JH Collective and we were doing, it had always been a struggle like making time for gigs and travelling around the country... And now, I had this year where I could work, I was working as a runner at 750mph which is a sound studio that's still on Golden Square, right, 750 Golden Square. I was working as a runner there, learning about sound and about recording and getting lunch for David Harewood and Alan Rickman was like coming in to do these voiceovers for adverts and ADRE and stuff, you know, and I was getting coffees and lunches for these guys, you know, just thinking 'wow you're amazing', you know, 'you're doing what I would love to be doing'.

And then going off and doing these gigs, and also in that time I had started kind of taking acting a little bit more serious, but it was still kind of hard to penetrate because if I didn't apply to any drama school and I had never been part of any sort of 'official' like drama groups or whatever, I was just doing these kind of courses on the side - weekend courses for young people. One of my tutors saw me and said you should audition for something, and I did and I ended up getting the play, and it was a play called *Torn* that was at the Arcola theatre. I ended up doing that, I got my agent and then I started going up for auditions... and yeah, once that started happening, you know, where you're learning on your feet, I

could kind of see a world where I was doing this for a living and immediately I could see that it wasn't the kind of... I don't know, it just wasn't enough for me.

I just knew, Joe, that I needed to start writing - and I had all these kind of silly conversations with people, like I remember specifically once being in a cafe somewhere and you know, I'm young this is like, I've only done one play, I haven't read that many plays - not completely, and I'm a young person, I think I'd just turned 19. The kind of plays that you read when you're that young, you don't, you know, it's not that broad you know - it's just about the classics and the modern classics and things like that that you play around with and do a little bit of this and that. But I remember being in the theatre, in the cafe somewhere with a bunch of like actors - people who do this for real, and kind of going to them 'oh is there a play about like about this thing, like where someone does that?' and they were all just looking at me, like 'There might be, like, I don't know, maybe there is, I don't know!' [The laugh]. But they just keep talking about like their career and sh*t, and then I'll just come up with it again, and I'll be like 'Oh wait, but do you guys know of a play where like a woman like walks down the street and does this weird thing?' and they're like 'bro, what is your issue? I don't know, like, there might be, there might be a play that does that!'

And it was just a curiosity, Joe, I was like I wonder, whether it is this story or that story and then I realized that that was just my imaginative, inventive brain wanting to create those stories... so I got in touch with the Royal Court, and I said to them I think I want to be a writer, and they were like well, we have these courses the Critical Mass, the Young Writers' Programme, you've missed the Young Writers' Programme, but if you deliver us 10 pages in a week you'll meet the deadline for the Critical Mass, and so I whipped up something... at three in the morning the night before the deadline.

JM:

[Laughing] It's when you do your best work mate, it's when you do your best work.

AK:

It's that hour, man, it's the magical hour! Anyway, got it in and then that was, I guess, the rest is history, you know. And I was just sitting there with other writers who are just as, some, just as green and curious as me, and some who have written plays since they were seven, you know...

JM:

Did you find, because obviously it's a slightly unusual route in, you know, your background, the way into it, coming from that sporting, sort of musical performance side of things, you know, it's not a background you see in every writer, to have those sort of slightly more eclectic experiences. Did you find that once you started talking about your writing, and mixing with other writers, that

again you found that your voice was coming from a slightly different place to everybody else's?

AK:

I guess so, yeah I guess so, that room, those rooms, those early rooms were interesting, you know. That's a really good question, Joe, because I forgot how different I felt, you know, how green I felt, in those rooms. Like you don't really get in that room unless you, well, I mean okay, so generally, if you make it to young writers group or Critical Mass or whatever, you've got some sort of, you know, knowledge about theatre and about plays and about all that stuff, you know, but I was really green. As in like, the first play my family went to see, my m and dad, was when they came to see me in something... in fact my m and dad have never been to the theatre if I'm not on stage, like that's just still the way.

JM:

[Laughing] It's a good rule of thumb I think, if Arinzé's in it, go see it and if he's not, don't bother.

AK:

Don't bother, yeah, I mean it's only theatre. But yeah, you know, I just came from a different background, and yes, we do have like an incredible kind of history of storytelling in Nigeria where I was born but it's very different, you know, and so yeah, those rooms did feel quite new to me. For one you know being an inner city kid from Hackney, the one thing that I would like feel straight away in those rooms were the fact that I was very often the only black person - in those types of rooms, right. Not Critical Mass because Critical Mass specifically was outreach, you know, to communities who might not get their stories heard or told, you know. And so that room actually had a few, had you know majority people of colour, you know but I heard it was very different on the parallel young writers company, and so on. And to be honest, you know, most of the groups that I was in after that, you know, I was very often either like the only black guy or there might be another, you know. But these are the things, Joe, that did kind of make me feel a little bit iso, you know, in the beginning.

And then it's the type of stories that I want to tell you know, and I was, I mean my first play, the play that I wrote at the Royal Court – it ended up going on, Nick Herne Books just published it last year. It's called *Estate Walls*, right *Estate Walls*, and it was about this wall on the estate that was behind where I lived, right, and yeah it was just about some people I knew who would sit on the wall. I kind of based it on mainly around one person I knew and then, you know, just enjoyed myself for being creative and thinking like a madman... and yeah it was just like that was it -

JM:

I just want to point out there's a sort of recurring theme in your story... it's basically every time you go 'oh I just went and I did this' and then 'oh I got the job' or 'oh yeah my play went on, oh no yeah then it got published'.

AK:

[Both laugh] I mean the story behind getting it on I mean...

JM:

You don't present that in an arrogant way, I don't mean that at all, it's all very humble! It's just, it's just incredible to hear, you know what I mean, that because you approach it with integrity and truth, you know, and endeavour, and hard work, and energy, it pays off, it really pays off, and it's just great to hear I think.

AK:

Thank you. Yeah, it does pay off, I think.

JM:

Hugely. And it's usually your writing, because I can't let you be on this podcast without talking about *Misty*, because...

AK:

Well, then I'm not going to talk about it [They both laugh]

JM:

Don't do that to me man, don't rob me of this opportunity! It's just because, that feels like, only from the outside, and it would be great to hear your thoughts, but it felt like such a complete expression of you. And I was watching it as, like no one else could have written or performed this, like this is completely him, just like good, bad, ugly for better, for worse, you know everything was just, this is just somebody going like 'this is who I am, and this is what I want to say' or 'this is part of who I am, and this is what I want to say'. But, in watching it also feels exposing as a play, for the performer and the writer, and quite radical and disruptive and terrifying, and I feel like you can't have had any idea what people would respond to in it? Because I felt like it broke so many rules that you must have just gone 'we're just going to put it on and see what audiences do' because it's just like... so it should be interesting about that piece, or how that came about, what that process was and what that was like to write that show. Or I may just be aware of the mark and actually it was a complete fiction, obviously nothing to do with you - it felt like a real expression of somebody.

AK:

Yeah, no, it's a complete fiction bro. You know, ghost written by someone else... nothing to do with me! [Joe laughs]. No, you described it better than I could have actually. It was truly a real kind of, quite a genuine and honest expression of me as a creative and also just letting my imagination run wild. I feel like I was so lucky, this is another thing that I haven't said, I don't think I've said it in our talk, but it's really important to work with people who believe in you because if you can find them - I mean please do, you know go out and look - because it helps, man, it really does, you know. When you want to really play, it helps when the people in the room aren't afraid, you know.

And with *Misty*, Omar Elerian, my Director, and Madani Younis, the Artistic Director of the Bush at the time, Kirsty Housley, who was our Dramaturg for a while and Stuart Pringle, Dramaturg, and I'm forgetting one other, who was the Dramaturg for the shortest period, but he was also just brilliant in the room. And then everybody else who came and helped us workshop, the musicians who kind of didn't get *any* music until the first day, and were just kind of like, and I would just sing them melodies and they were like 'okay I think that's in, I think that's in B...', you know, whatever, like it was it was a mad one. But, here's the thing because I don't know how to work any other way, man. Like, you know this is how I do it, I make, I write as much as I can, and then we throw it around, man, and what sticks because it's meant to and then what doesn't just goes in the drain. And with *Misty* it was various workshops where we were all free just to do that and there was this whole performance aspect of it that I really kind of wanted. The good thing about *Misty* again was, and I've never worked this way as well, but every step of the way the performer was in the room because it was it's the first time I've written it for me, so it was like 'can I do that?', you know.

Sometimes it was incredibly challenging but I was like 'we could do it', you know, if I have weeks of practice I might be able to pull that off. It became more than. This is why for me, I can't describe *Misty* as a play because it wasn't me sitting down and writing, it was me going home writing songs or half a song, coming in, thinking 'is that working?', turning a rap into a song and then piecing some stuff together, going back, writing an essay about how I feel about the industry, coming in, breaking it up, putting it up on the wall, going 'how do I turn this essay into a scene?', and then going home like ripping voices, sound audio of Morgan Freeman and Whoopi Goldberg, and going 'how do I get them to talk back to me and be really angry at me?'. Because these are my heroes and it was kind of like, 'how do I get my heroes to be my enemy and to talk back to me?', which is what it feels like, you know?

I didn't even care if people understood, I just wanted to make the thing that I knew made sense to me and to everybody else in the room. I think we were lucky enough to have the right people, because the truth is, if a different Artistic Director, if it wasn't Madani Younis, they might have gone... I mean, I remember the last workshop we did, and this is this is you know, I'll just say this short. But

the last workshop we did was November the 30th 2017, and everyone who came to that workshop - if you're listening to this remember how you felt brah, when you walked out of that room. Because you were like, what the hell is this crap that they're putting on?? It's gonna die, it's dead, like these guys are messing up like you know... Honestly we confused the hell out of that room, and a couple writers in there as well, you know who you are! They were in the bar afterwards, and were like 'it was... it was...'. To be honest, as well there was a part of me that was completely like, I understood actually, like I was just playing before with the 'you know who you are'... I completely understood that the truth is *Misty* was a thing that was written to be performed, like we performed that workshop in the attic, and it was in the attic without tech, without really much music, and without any *balloons*.

JM:

You can't do the show without balloons, it doesn't make any sense!

AK:

How can you do about it without the balloons? It's impossible! Yeah, so wasn't surprised that people didn't understand it, that it didn't land at all. But the main thing was that the last people I had a drink with that evening of the 30th of November was Omar and Madani, and we all just kind of shared a moment and we're like 'yeah man, we know what it is, we got it' and knowing that two months later we were about to mount it, but we were like 'yeah it's ready, it's like nearly ready, we'll figure the rest of it out in the in the room', and yeah, that was it, that's all I needed.

JM:

The Crucible, I mean you know amazing play by Arthur Miller, I suppose on the surface about the Salem Witch Trials in the 1600s and the Puritanical settlers and the sort of hysteria cause in a town as accusations of witchcraft are sent around and that fear and panic seems to grip the town. Truth, perspective, shared decency, compassion, understanding, all of these things are eroded in the face of, I suppose it was essentially fake news. Extreme emotion, hysteria, fear, accusation, paranoia... and in the play, I suppose you know John Proctor and Elizabeth Proctor, two people who try and stand against that, and suffer the ultimate consequence for that. But then also obviously it's quite a thinly veiled metaphor for McCarthyism, when it was written in the sort of Communist witch hunting going on in America. But what is it a play about for you?

AK:

Well, you've said it all, you've said it all, Jo [they laugh] it's like yeah - end of the podcast see ya! No I'm only kidding, only kidding

JM:

Sorry sorry, just trying to sum it up in case anyone doesn't know the play, bit of context!

AK:

Yeah, what he said, what he said, that was good. [they laugh] No I'm kidding, sorry. What did you ask?

JM:

What's the connection for you, what is it about this play that gets you?

AK:

Alright. Am I allowed to swear, I'm not am I?

JM:

Yeah man, come on, let's me rogue. I did notice a 'frigging' earlier and thought 'he's censored himself there'

AK:

So much. Honestly, I'm not even a big swearer, but I have to swear when I say this - but this play scared the shit out of me. It did. I saw it before I read it. It was the one that I'd avoided. Miller's my top three, you know, I've read *View From The Bridge*, I think like many of us that's like our first kind of Miller. Or *Death of a Salesman*, it's like a nicer introduction. I'd read and seen that, and I'd read and seen *Salesman* and *All My Sons* as well. The *Crucible* I had tried to read and then put down, and so when I saw that there was this production of it at The Old Vic, a friend of mine had gone 'oh yeah let's go and see this play you know and you know I'll get the tickets, let's go on this matinee blah blah blah' and I had gone and then I was there texting my mate, like 'hey man when you getting here?' and he was like 'oh man, I forgot man, my bad' and it was fully sold out you know, he didn't even get the tickets - what a mate!

JM:

Unbelievable

AK:

Anyway I go and I sit down and I watch it myself. And it was an incredible production and it was really just frightening because, just, yeah, scariest play I've ever seen. It's just, kind of one of my worst nightmares is being dragged into something, either for no reason or because of my beliefs, you know. I think Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, the reason why that's one of my favourite stories, just you know, imagine just waking up to these suited and booted men in your room just saying 'hey man, you've gotta be in court, you've done something wrong, can't tell you what, but you've gotta go and talk about it and start defending yourself'.

You go and start defending yourself, but you don't know what you're defending yourself for, and they can't really tell you why you've been brought here, or why these men are following you everywhere.... With *The Crucible*, it's an idea of

something rotten that someone's made up made up and have dragged like quite innocent people into. Structurally, it's also one of my favourite plays because of, I guess John Proctor is the main protagonist, but the antagonist - and I don't know anyone's name in this play - but it grows, I remember my experience... it beginning, it was the father of Betty, the Reverend Parris, right? I feel like he had some people who didn't like him or whatever, he had a reason to be on people's good side. And so now when his daughter is kind of talking, she's in a fever and she's been acting a weird way, he has a reason to want to dispel people's concerns and so on. And he's like a mini antagonist you know, it's just so small and then it just grows, with Reverend... another one, Hail, you know and then it just *grows*. It's this beautiful thing where every time the antagonist becomes this kind of bigger, more powerful, darker energy, they shit on the previous antagonist, and use them to get up in a way.

It's so beautiful and it's so scary because, John isn't growing, John Proctor isn't growing. In fact, the antagonists growing, it's like - ok, here we go - it's almost like a virus spreading. It's this kind of thing spreading into the mind of more powerful people. As that's happening the community also turning against, they have to pick a side, and they see that they don't match up against this powerful dark energy, and so they get dragged into supporting it. I saw the play, I didn't know about the Communism tones, the McCarthyism tones, I just saw it for what it was on stage. And I saw how someone could basically spin evil for their own personal gain, the evil of calling a woman a witch because of whatever... the evil, you know, of, I mean you know, pick one...

JM:

Yeah but also it's preying on those latent fears, isn't it? It's manipulating through fear, it's so dark. I think that's what's great is, what's genius about the playwright and the writing is you can know nothing about Communism and McCarthyism, he's boiled it down to like the human element of it, not the political element and that just feels so powerful. Everything you're talking about, Arinzé, makes me think like if you just swap the word 'Crucible' out for 'Today', it sounds like it's describing the world we live in. I mean, do you find that, does this play talk to today for you?

AK:

It absolutely does. I mean last night, yes I was up at 2.30 in the morning watching the Vice Presidential debate... yeah man, we are in a strange world right now and you know, I know that's the US and we are over here in the UK, but we have our own issues and who knows what the history books are going to write about this, or how we'll survive, or if we'll survive. I think we will, but it's definitely gonna be, it's getting ugly and it's gonna be uglier before we're fully out of the woods, if ever. But yeah, it's very important today. If I was an Artistic Director or something I'd be thinking about when to program this, you know, maybe bring it as maybe as the first play back when we open theatres because it is so current, and I think people want to see this.

This is why it's one of my favourites because it's timeless. If you had put this play on 10 years ago I'm sure it would speak to that time. There's never been a time where minorities aren't attacked in the name of patriotism. That's always happened, and there's never been a time where evil ideas aren't spread as lies and fake news in order to be for propaganda or political or gain, you know, and whether it be political or monetary, it's just such a an important play that kind of speaks to not just all times but also all ages. I feel like there was a version of this play that I missed, it was it was on at The Yard, and I saw a very big production of it at The Old Vic but I think, maybe it was either last year or the year before, there was a production of it at The Yard that had been pared down and there was a lot of doubling, but it even worked in this small space. Here's the thing, it's Miller and Miller is a genius and it's not like, man, it's just such beautiful storytelling. What did I watch last night, like I'm sitting here, I'm watching a lot more movies because of, you know, the theatres are closed down, and it's great, movies are wonderful. But with these massive plays you really get to explore something that you just can't do in cinema, with these dialogues and with the debates that Miller is having and that Miller is putting in people's mouths.

The emotional journeys and psychological journeys that you go on with these characters, some of this stuff you can really only do in the theatre live when you have two and a half, three hours, and when you have the lights, and you have the smoke and you have your... you have to kind of feel the vibration of somebody's voice from the stage to your seat, and that is how he writes, you know. This play, it was written for the theatre and it really like... what was I watching last night? I don't know, it was, I don't know what I was watching last night but I think it was you know 'save the girl' or 'find the killer of the dead girl' type thing, and it's like...

JM:

Yeah, that incredibly novel and unused idea previously.

AK:

Oh my god, I mean I've never seen it used before, you know, blew my mind.

JM:

So bold! Violence to women, oh great, that's brilliant.

AK:

And then we're talking about this and this is like, I don't know man it's just this is what makes me miss theatre, you know I'm crying inside man. It's like, this is what you can achieve, with Millers.

JM:

Yeah definitely, and just that slower pace I think in theatre, you can sit with someone for a lot longer can't you, a character, whereas TV or film I feel like it

demands to move quicker, you've got to get into the next scenario, the next jump cut, the next whatever.

AK:

Yeah, that's true, I mean every time I come and see your productions I'm just like fucking hell, this is slow, slow paced you know, is that what you're talking about, Joe? [Joe laughs loudly]

JM:

Yes mate. I'm embracing your adversity, I'm going to turn it into an opportunity, and I'm excited about that. So look for *Misty 2*, that's going to be written by me about a ginger guy in the city, trying to find his place

AK:

I'm coming to that bro, I'm in the foyer now

JM:

Well you know the balloons were orange, in my head I was like that's a nod to me Arinzé, thank you, that's a nod to my ginger hair.

AK:

I'm so glad you saw that.

JM:

Yeah a lot of people saw that, but I'm glad we can set the record straight.

AK:

Oh yeah me too

JM:

Hearing you talk about theatre just makes me miss it even more, because you're totally right. It's also like the well-made play, I suppose, do you know what I mean, like it's that sort of it's in four acts. And obviously *Misty* in some ways is the complete opposite of that, but in classic kind of Arinzé eclectic style do you also want to write the well-made play, like does that structural form interest you as well as the slightly more radical disruptive form? Or do you just appreciate that in other writers, but that's not your thing?

AK:

I don't think it's my thing, no. I, you know, I really... I really haven't you know... should I should I use language and words?

JM:

Yeah I think it's a good idea yeah I like it.

AK:

Yeah that might be better... I have had a good time being a writer for the last 13 years and it's because of, I really get to play and do whatever. I have written the kitchen sink play you know, I'd say that's *God's Property*. I've written the monologue play, *Misty*, I've written the kind of like teen triptych kind of whatever, *Little Baby Jesus*, I can't remember what inspired that structure but, who knows man, who knows if there is a kind of well-made play in there you know. But I don't know if there is, you know, it doesn't seem, it's not really the way that I write or make work anyway. I feel like... I don't know, at this point I don't know what the structure is until the end. It's because the structure has to worship the story and what I'm trying to say and convey and

JM:

So is it a gut feeling that comes first for you then, and then you follow that do you?

AK:

Maybe, yeah. Sometimes there's a gut feeling about an issue, or sometimes it's a statement I want to explore, sometimes it's a character, I can hear something... I hear lines, a sentence, or it's just a character you know. Like the next thing I'm writing right now, I have a character, I don't have a journey, I don't know what she does I don't know, well I know what she does for a living, but I don't know what she's doing in the story. It can begin anywhere, but my point is just that I don't have the character and then go 'okay so how do I fit this character into a four act structure?', or I don't have the subject and then go 'okay so how do I fit this into de de de de de de'

Some people do and that's great, but I'm not that person, I kind of just play and play until I start enjoying myself. I try and figure out what I love about it and there really is no singular kind of... I keep a writing journal, right, and I've realised from like, I don't go back in it much, but sometimes I do, but I've realised that my process has never been the same ever, like it never is, never like replicates something that I did earlier. I just begin anywhere and then sometimes it ends really quickly and it's ready to go to the next stage, and sometimes it's just kind of at this kind of simmering energy for like years sometimes, you know, it's just who knows?

JM:

Amazing

AK:

I feel like I'm lucky to be able to work this way if I'm honest, because I know that like it's something that probably people have to... I know that in the beginning it was very different, like people wanted plays from me, I had to kind of work quickly sometimes to keep momentum, you know. But now I get to take my time, I get to have workshops which is one of the best things in the world, just get a

bunch of creatives, actors, director, dramaturg, musicians in a room and yeah it's, I know I'm lucky to be able to do that.

JM:

Yeah I mean it's an amazing way of working. It sounds like a really adventurous, complex, scary, exciting sort of way of working that seems to produce really interesting results - so you know it seems to work for you. Even though you couldn't, it's kind of indescribable in a way, you couldn't teach it or replicate it, you know what I mean, it's just your process and I think that's really exciting to hear.

AK:

I mean in the studio, do you know, I feel like I know what I'm trying to replicate because the longest thing, the thing I've done for the longest is made music right? And I realised that there's a rhythm that whenever, because I've probably made like over 100 songs now at this point, but like there's a rhythm that I now have, and it's the rhythm of going into this room, making like a coffee or a tea with a bunch of people, just talking like shooting the shit, just talking about anything, and then watching or listening to something. We could listen to John Coltrane or we could listen to Ciara, or Beyoncé or whatever, it's just listening to something. We might not be listening to the artist, it might be the beat or the instrumental or whatever, and then just beginning. It's beginning with the discussion about it, and about what we want to do, maybe. It might even not have anything to do with what we're, maybe we've invited Ciara in the room, she might not have anything to do with what we're doing, but that's kind of... I enjoy that type of environment where you're just kind of locked in, and you're just inviting random spirits. Just playing, man.

JM:

Love it, just playing. I think just playing is the theme right through everything, through all your explanations. When you were younger, that idea of just playing, just being open, just going in, mixing it up, seeing what happens. I think that's the sort of defining feature of you and your work underneath all of it.

AK:

It is. And when I start making absolutely tragic crappy shows, they're going to be like 'oh he needs to stop playing, I don't know why he's doing that, he needs to sit down and write a four act well-made play' [Joe laughs]. You know, when you see a four act one man play from me, just know that the playing stopped yeah?

JM:

I'll also I know that's probably the beginning of the end, okay he's in the dark days [they laugh]. Amazing. Well listen man, thank you so much for being on the show and for having a conversation with us, for just being so open about your experiences, your process, really really amazing to hear and exciting - and I imagine for a lot of creatives and writers out there it's great to hear a really

different angle on it, on both an approach to how you got into the work and how you make the work. It's really exciting, so thank you, thank you.

AK:

Thank you, man, thank you. We've got to get in the room together as well at some point, that'd be glorious.

JM:

Yes, I will hold you to that Arinzé. I've now got that recorded.

AK:

Yeah, I can be slow, you know, I can make slow theatre. know.

JM:

[Laughing] Yeah I'll be like Arinzé mate, 'too fast, too fast, slow down, it's theatre, we've got three hours, stop racing through!'.

So, I will play that regularly to you, so get ready for that 'oh I'm busy Joe, oh I can't', I'll be like, 'mate we've got it on record!'

AK:

I'm there mate, I'm theatre.

JM:

Alright man, well much love, thank you so much.

AK:

Thanks for having me on the show.

JM:

The amazing Arinzé there, everybody. I loved hearing his insights on the play, his career and this industry as a whole. His philosophy of charting your own course and turning obstacles into opportunities is very inspiring.

Thanks so much for listening and continuing to support us at the Sherman Theatre and The Old Vic. Until next time. Go gently and go safely.

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