

Transcript of PlayCrush podcast Series 3, Episode 1 | Golda Rosheuvel, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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Joe Murphy:

Hello everyone and welcome to PlayCrush. It's Joe Murphy here this week we are joined by the extraordinary Golda Rosheuvel.

I'm sure like the rest of the planet, you've been binge watching Golda on the hit Netflix series *Bridgerton*, in which she steals the show as Queen Charlotte, but Golda has a long list of amazing credits to her name beyond the mega hit TV series. Her theatre credits include *Othello*, *The Big I Am* and *Paint your Wagon* for Everyman Liverpool; *The American Clock*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Electra* and *Carmen Jones* for The Old Vic; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* and *We Will Rock You* on the West End; *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* for the RSC; *The Front Line* and *Romeo and Juliet* at the Globe; *Porgy and Bess* and *Macbeth* at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, *Now We're Here* at the Young Vic and *Angels in America* at Headlong, to name but a few. On screen, there is of course *Bridgerton* but also *Silent Witness*, *Eastenders*, *Luther*, *Torchwood*, the upcoming film *Dune*, the indie film smash hit *Lady Macbeth* and her film breakthrough role in *Lava*. I'm sure you'll agree that is an impressive list from an impressive actor.

It was a privilege to chat with Golda about all things life and acting. Her story is an amazing one, and she also happens to be an incredibly funny, charming and wonderful human being. Golda's PlayCrush is *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson. It is an astounding piece of work and Netflix are currently streaming a film version of the play starring Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is a 1982 play, one of the ten play Pittsburgh cycle by August Wilson that chronicles the 20th century African American experience. The play is set in Chicago in the 1920s and deals with issues of race, art, religion and the historic exploitation of black recording artists by white producers. The play's title comes from Ma Rainey's song of the same name which refers to the black bottom dance. Rainey, whose life as a well-known Blues singer of the 1920s, is an inspiration for the play, is also the titular character. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was published in the early 1980s and premiered in the Eugene O'Neill theatre centre. Its Broadway debut at the Court Theatre in 1984 won a New York Drama Critics Circle Award and garnered a Tony Award nomination for best play.

In a Chicago recording studio in 1927, Ma Rainey's band players, Cutler Toledo, Slow Drag and Levee, are gathered to record a new album of her songs. As they wait for her to arrive they tell stories, joke, philosophise and argue. Tension is apparent between the very young and hot-headed trumpeter Levee who dreams of having his own band, and veterans Cutler and Toledo. By the time Ma Rainey arrives, with entourage in tow, recording has fallen badly behind schedule, enraging producers Sturdyvant and Irvin.

Ma's insistence that her stuttering nephew Sylvester speak the title song's introduction wreaks further havoc. As the band waits for various technical problems to be solved, Levee and Cutler come to blows. Levee is then simultaneously fired by Ma and rejected by producer Sturdyvant, and in a rage fatally stabs Toledo, destroying any possibility of a future for himself. It's a beautiful, profound and ultimately harrowing look at the African American experience in the 1920s, an exploration of the insidious nature of oppression, how oppression so often makes the anger and violence it causes be directed sideways against allies instead of upwards against the oppressors themselves. If you haven't read it, I can't recommend it enough, and the film version is pretty good too.

And now, without further ado, here is Golda Rosheuvel...

Golda Rosheuvel:

...with my PlayCrush, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson.

JM:

Hello Golda, how's it going?

GR:

Hello Joe! it's going really well, mate, oh my goodness so good to talk to you! Thank you for having me!

JM:

Oh my god, thank you for coming on! Incredibly excited to have you kicking off series 3, I mean you're you are the start of series 3!

GR:

Oh am I? That's nice!

JM:

Yep, number one

GR:

Oh I like that, number one!

JM:

And how have you been? How's 2021 shaping up for you so far?

GR:

2021 is being very nice at the moment, she's been very calm which is good... I'm being doing bits and pieces in a little show that I filmed a few years ago, and came out on Christmas day... just a tiny little thing that I've been doing little thing that I've been doing

JM:

Just one of those little things, one of those little annoying shows, you've got to do it, no one wants to do, it's never going to make your career go anywhere, you're like 'alright I'll do it'

GR:

The pain of my life! As you know, everybody will probably know, we're talking about *Bridgerton* and the Netflix hit, and I play Queen Charlotte in it, which is magic, and there's lots of other beautiful, gorgeous people actors in it that we all know, so I've been doing...

JM:

I mean I do feel like it should be called *Bridgerton: A Queen Charlotte Story*, like that's what it feels like to me, but yes there are lots of other great actors in it as well.

GR:

Yeah I mean, who knew I'll tell you a little bit of a fun fact, I actually went up for Lady Danbury originally, and obviously didn't get it, but then they asked me to they asked me to do a couple of little scenes of Queen Charlotte, on like a self tape which I sent off. And you know, me and my partner did it in half an hour, I mean I wasn't taking it seriously at all, and kind of went off, it was just before Christmas, and I went off I think we went down to the South of France or something for Christmas and New Year. And like in the middle of Christmas, that week, in the middle of Christmas and New Year, I got a phone call from my agent saying 'Um, they kind of liked you as Queen Charlotte and the director liked you, the writer likes you, and they're just waiting for Shonda Rhimes to give the okay'. I was like, what... okay I mean... really?? You know, it's one of those things where you search for the cameras, the hidden cameras. You kind of go, wow, this is this might be a reality. And then you know the kind of the week where everybody comes back after New Year it became a reality, Joe. And yeah who knew a couple of years down the line...

JM:

And are you aware, like... I'm sorry, I'm just, many apologies, I'm gonna have to talk about this for a while because this is just too exciting or too fun. Are you aware like as an actor when you get because obviously that's like quite a magical call, big series, big part, Netflix hit, Shonda, I mean the great Shonda she's like just signing off on me, absolutely amazing. Are you aware, like were you aware, because for me *Bridgerton* sort of came out of nowhere, like I didn't even see any hype about it or anything, suddenly it was just everywhere. Were you aware when you got it, did you think this would be a game changer? Or did you think, oh this is a great job, that'd be really exciting?

GR:

Absolutely did not know it would be a game changer. It was a beautiful job that I was doing, I was going in a couple of times a week for like two or three days filming, it was in beautiful lovely English countryside, beautiful lovely English manor houses, it was just one of those jobs. And beautiful people, I can't stress enough that the cast are just absolutely lovely, just gorgeous gorgeous actor people, you know. We were having a ball and nobody knew nobody knew kind of what we were doing how it was going to be even edited

or you know what kind of Shondaland and Netflix wanted out of this period drama. This kind of weird, quirky, out there period drama. We knew, it was in the writing, you knew it was something that was a little bit more of a twist on your kind of normal period drama, do you know what I mean? Fun fact as well the Queen Charlotte actually isn't in Julia Quinn's books that *Bridgerton* is based on, yeah so that was really interesting to kind of be in this world that had already been created by Julia Quinn, but also to have the, what's the word I'm looking for... the kind of

JM:

Sort of freedom?

GR:

Yeah, freedom, to play with a character like Queen Charlotte that is in history, that was all kicking around at that time you know, but you know – that half the professors say that she was mixed race, and half don't. I'll go with the half that think that she was, because one I think that's really interesting and kind of you know turns the dial up on you know black people in British community do you know what I mean? So yeah, there was a real great, yeah freedom, as you say in playing Queen Charlotte, and we were all playing and we were all having fun with these characters because you know they are larger than life, but I think in the writing there is so much reality, and so much kind of... it is a fantasy yes, but I think you can really grasp on the reflection of characters and the pain that they're going through, and you know the pandemic has really starved us of those - going to the cinema going to the theatre - you know those kind of escapisms that we need, and I think you know *Bridgerton* really dropped at that moment where everybody needed that escapism, so you know.

JM:

Oh my god, completely. You could just tell it was like food to a starving man, you could just tell that like fun, and sure pain, but kind of overriding joy and energy and explosiveness, and yeah, and I think that's right and like the best fantasy cuts to truth right?

GR:

Absolutely, agreed

JM:

Absolutely. God, that's so exciting. And when you were filming, because there's also something you've mentioned, you know, about that mixed race potential of Queen Charlotte, and also the kind of beautiful diversity of the show. Did that feel different when you turned up on a period drama set, and you're like this just looks and feels different?

GR:

Absolutely yeah, completely, completely, completely. 100% Joe and you know I don't take any credit for putting Queen Charlotte in you know, at the top of the food chain of *Bridgerton*, but you know I think it was a really clever and decisive move on Shonda Rhimes and Chris Van Dusen, the writer and

creator, to put the black queen, the mixed race queen, or the biracial queen, however you want to say it, in at the top of the food chain. So then, you kind of give license to pushing those boundaries as far as you can, you know, and allowing black and brown artists, black and brown actors, black and brown characters to shine in a real positive light, you know. We are capable of love, we are capable of tragedy, we are capable of trauma, we are capable, you know. And *Ma Rainey* really lends itself, if we're gonna pop the play in there as well, it really lends itself to that as well, and August Wilson's writing I think. There's such a journey from *Ma Rainey* through to *Bridgerton* that really is kind of the stepping stone of Black stories, and how they were then and how they are now. I think that it's a tremendous journey that we've been on.

JM:

Definitely, a hundred percent. And yeah it's interesting to link them because also you could talk about food chain, and you know as we'll go on to when we talk about *Ma Rainey* who is the top of the food chain, in that place, so yeah that fight for that position is so interesting I think. And yeah, I think you're right, it's such a bold move isn't it, because if you put the highest ranking person with diversity in them, then like you say it just opens up those boundaries for everybody else doesn't it? That's really exciting and thrilling, and in a way, I think it's part of *Bridgerton*'s power, you know, it's not just that fantasy, it's not just those stories it's representation as well I think.

GR:

It's representation and inclusivity, do you know what I mean? All of that stuff is front and centre

JM:

Yeah, but I like it because it's, in a sense that it just does it, it just cracks on with it. And that's kind of beautiful, just from the first poster, you go oh man how exciting, you can just see what they're doing and that's just thrilling I think. And, just because I love gossip, talk to me about what it's been like since. Like I often daydream that I'm something to do with some sort of extraordinary global smash hit, but it's never come to fruition yet. I mention, *yet*. What is that whirlwind like?

GR:

To be honest, it's pretty weird, Joe, because we're all inside [they laugh]. It kind of feels like it's all going out it's all going on outside my front door. But you know, obviously we have social media, and yeah I'm doing interviews and stuff and a lot of lovely things are being said about the show and, you know, it's award season and popping up you know in several award categories and stuff which is really really great. I think all of that is thrilling, I think it's fun, I think it's you know it's a celebration of our work, you know, all of that stuff is really great. But in terms of people stopping me on the street, that's not happening, because you know people are following the rules and staying home! But yeah I mean I've had some weird stuff happen on social media, like yeah people claiming that they're my relatives... possibly?

JM:

No! That's amazing. What, like I'm your fourth cousin once removed, can we hang out?

GR:

Yeah, really strange... you know my Instagram went from a lovely 800 people and I thought *that* was amazing to now, I think it's I think it's nearing 48,000.

JM:

So it's a little jump, there's a little jump there, it's not much

GR:

It's a tiny little jump there, Joe. And it's that kind of stuff where you go, wow okay, oh okay right...

JM:

And is that pressure or it joy? Or is it kind of a mix of both?

GR:

I think it's joy. I think it's just a tiny bit of pressure, but I think that's more pressure that I put on myself to be the best that can be. I think it's wonderful I'm, you know, celebrating it. I'm even celebrating the negative stuff - oh there is very little, I mean when the first trailer came out, you know, I was in the trailer and people were talking about the Queen, and you know I posted the trailer and stuff, and people were doing nice, nice comments, lovely, lovely comments. And I came across this one comment that said 'Don't care, she's not in the books.'

JM:

[Laughs] Brutal, absolutely brutal!

GR:

I was like that's fantastic, I loved it! Apparently I'm amazing and must be protected at all times, somebody said.

JM:

Nice, yeah true, I agree, I agree.

GR:

There was another post that was like 'You are amazing * angry face *' which was...

JM:

Confusing! Mixed messages

GR:

It was very confusing. But I loved it, I love all that kind of stuff. So yeah that's you know me, sitting at home, Joe, that's the kind of thing that I'm receiving and enjoying.

JM:

I mean so surreal as you say that, I just, I hadn't really put two and two together, but it's so surreal to be of a moment like this but basically still in your front room. What else can you do, except for sit in your front room?

GR:

But I think in, through my career I have never really been recognised, only a couple of times like for things, you know, my kind of Holby City adventures and that kind of stuff, but I think the characters that I play, they're so kind of other to me. Do you know what I mean? They're extreme characters, and they're so fun to play, but the look is so divorced of my own look, do you know what I mean?

JM:

Yes, yeah

GR:

And I think you know, I'm not gonna walk down the street you know, I don't walk down in a huge wig and tiaras.

JM:

I feel like you should, I feel like you should, but fine that you don't.

GR:

Yeah, yeah, but you know so it would be interesting to see... I don't know, it might all blow over dear and I'll walk down the street and nobody will ever recognise me.

JM:

and then you'll get the wigs on you'll be like, come on guys, work harder, come on, you can see who I am.

GR:

'It's me!' with a big placard and an arrow pointing to my face, saying 'Queen Charlotte! Smiley face' but yeah, that's always kind of been my journey that nobody really kind of recognises me.

JM:

But I can see that, because I mean you got like basically, it's like Tom Cruise who plays Tom Cruise in every movie, I love Tom Cruise, but he just plays Tom Cruise, and I love it and I'm into that. But it's true, your work is quite immersive I think, and you do tend to disappear behind the character, which I think is the most fun acting I get to watch, you know. I love going to see an actor and go 'Whoa, I cannot tell that's them'. It's really exciting. And just as you've talked about that, I mean it'd be great just to kind of chat about where it began, what has that journey been to global superstardom that we now enjoy from your front room? You know, like where did that start for you?

GR:

Gosh I think, I mean... Okay so family is very musical, that was kind of my first interjection to artistry or storytelling, in a way. There was music, there was, I was brought up on classical music, Jazz... my dad played the steel pan, guitar, piano, my brother plays any instrument you can give him, he went to King's College Cambridge, so he has an amazing chorister voice, amazing voice. I had struggled with instruments, I always wanted to play brilliantly like as soon as my fingers hit the keys and got so frustrated. But having said that I played the clarinet to I think I'm about, I don't know four or five grades, maybe.

JM:

That's very impressive

GR:

But as soon as I started singing, that was kind of my in to an instrument and the first thing I ever sang was Handel's Messiah with my mother, I think at the age of god, wow, we were talking about this the other day - like 14.. 13, 14, 15, something like that.

JM:

The first thing I sang was probably like Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and like you're hitting it with Messiah, like straight out, no prisoners.

GR:

I mean all of that choral stuff for me, choir stuff is extraordinary, and I love that so yeah Handel's Messaiah was kind of the first proper thing that I sang, with my, standing next to my mother in the choir, so that was that was kind of my first memory of... oh this is something nice and something juicy, but to be honest with you I was an athlete before that, that was kind of a major player in my life like, I ran 100 meters, I threw javelin, I did long jump, I ran four by one relay, I broke records in four by one relay, I trained, you know, to get to go to the Olympics and kind of in that way, and I was a tennis player and I was a hockey player, I was captain of my netball team, so that's really, right up until I suppose, like maybe yeah it's kind of 16, I was immersed in sports

JM:

Wow

GR:

And that was that was my life, training, getting up and training and, Harlow Athletics team was a big club for me when I was younger, and that's where I trained, and you know I would do little bits of theatre work at school, I played Buggy Malone in *Buggy Malone* at my secondary school yep

JM:

One of my favourite shows, by the way, great great show.

GR:

So that was kind of you know going alongside it, and then I got an injury and it was at that kind of teeny, you know, from kind of yeah, I suppose 16 onwards,

that the theatre work and the idea of going to a college that did a diploma in acting was a thing that I was really started to be interested in.

JM:

And don't come out of the injury, was it because you were denied something else?

GR:

It kind of did, although I suppose at that at that point I kind of remember juggling like after school activities, rehearsing for the play, rehearsing for the musical, do you know what I mean? Going to meetings, you know, for the athletics and you know playing at weekends and stuff, Saturday morning playing hockey for my county, and so it was kind of being juggled. And then the injury happened and I was out of all that stuff, but the music and the singing and the acting kind of started to develop more.

JM:

And was that, I mean was that like a blow, was the adjustment easy, were you like, did it hit you?

GR:

No I think the adjustment was easy, because as I said, it's all, that kind of art and creativity and music and has always been there since day one, you know, with my family, and having you know my brother going to quite a prestigious school and pursuing music, and it was just an understanding I think, and an understanding, and it was an easy transition. Having said that, when the Olympics were over here, I was out of work. I mean you couldn't write it you'd like you couldn't make it up.

JM:

That's brutal

GR:

It's really brutal, that's when I felt like that could have been me.

JM:

Absolutely savage and it was so, that summer was amazing, I remember that, it was it did I mean even I, who considers walking to probably be slightly too much exercise, even I was like man why aren't I an athlete?! This is the coolest thing ever, it's so brilliant. Yeah okay, great, so you got into music, you went to college, and then so how did that turn into like, what you do your life with, like what was the next phase for you?

GR:

Yeah I mean I did my diploma in acting and then I was, I got into London Studio Centre because I was going to do musicals, you know, I was going to be what is that thing, a triple threat. I was going to be a trip threat. I got into London Studio Centre, trained there, got my first job doing the European tour of *Hair*. And I got that while I was still at drama school, yeah I think I snuck out and went to the audition.

JM:

What, illegally? Absolutely amazing.

GR:

I think so, I think so, and then I had to have permission to go and do this tour. And I was I was in my last year, and so everyone graduated while I was doing the tour, everybody was graduating, so then when I finished the tour I had to go back

JM:

Ah no what, and finish the degree?

GR:

I finished the degree yeah.

JM:

What did that feel like, it's quite surreal I imagine?

GR:

I hated that, I hated everything about that. I wasn't a very happy chappie, I think I got into some scrapes there, rebelling, all of that. I had worked! The ego takes over ,you know 'I've had work, I've been out there, why do I have to go back?'. But I think it was the best thing for me in the end. And then, I go *Carmen Jones* at The Old Vic. That was my first professional job, at The Old Vic

JM:

What was that experience like?

GR:

Oh my god, I was a Swing, and I had to cover eight girls.

JM:

So you have to know eight tracks, and parts basically, and be ready?

GR:

Yes you do, and I went on every single night, mate

JM:

Did you?

GR:

I went on every single night for somebody different, every single night.

JM:

And is this, were you breaking legs on purpose to make sure you could go on or was this just you know flukey?

GR:

I wasn't breaking legs! I think, no disrespect to anybody, but there was a lot of time off being had.

JM:

Ah, I see, very nice! I mean that must have been great, though I mean exhausting and terrifying, but what a sort of trial by fire!

GR:

I was just gonna say, into the lion's den! One gets an amazing opportunity. I loved that though, yeah yeah it's a brilliant show.

JM:

I mean, that was quite a while ago now then I'm guessing?

GR:

I said a thousand years ago, 100 billion years ago. You know Ned at stage door was there, he can tell you when that was

JM:

Well at least it wasn't pre-Ned, because then we'd know it really was a very long time ago. So you just like, so you just kind of were out there then and working and was it still musicals mostly, or did you start to transition into straight plays?

GR:

No, a lot of musicals, so I did *Jesus Christ Superstar* I did *Tommy*, all original cast, I did *Fame*... I did a lot of stuff at, do you remember the Bridewell Theatre, do you know the Bridewell theatre?

JM:

Yes, yeah yeah.

GR:

I did *Songs for a New World* there and a few other things there, that was a great place, I loved working there, such a beautiful... it was an old swimming pool I think, it was, yeah. It was lovely and they built a stage on top of the old swimming pool, yeah it was really lovely. So I did a lot of stuff, there, so we did *We Will Rock You*, it was one of my gigs, then I did Daniel Kramer's *Hair*. *Hair* seems to be a thing, doesn't it?

JM:

It's like a recurring theme in your world!

GR:

It's a recurring theme. I did Daniel Kramer's *Hair* at, what's the theatre at Notting Hill?

JM:

The Gate?

GR:

The Gate, thank you so much. I did, yeah Hair at the gate for Daniel Kramer and that's when the RSC got in touch...

JM:

Sure, as they do.

GR:

I mean, I know. Daniel was an Associate there, and I know that they came down to see the show, and they got an agent to ask me to do to audition. They were doing the Complete Works, it was that year that they were doing the Complete Works and I was going up for *Julius Caesar*, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*. And I went up for it again, kind of not really... I mean, you know, Shakespeare. I'm dyslexic, so give you some kind of background, kind of history. I'm dyslexic, quite severely dyslexic, so Shakespeare was never something that I thought that I would ever be able to do.

JM:

It must've been your worst nightmare when you first opened up the pages.

GR:

Absolute worst nightmare. But through sheer determination, as Golda Rosheuvel has, I did my little you know, things, I had discussions with people and stuff like that, and you know there that you have to kind of... all the directors have to kind of talk to each other because this could be part, and you have to kind of marry up... and they wanted me to... I went up, yeah I just went up for the roles. What were the roles? Charmia in *Anthony and Cleopatra* and in *The Tempest*, the witches, the fairies, and then bits and pieces in *Julius Caesar*. So I went up for it, didn't think anything of it, Joe, and I get this call from my agent saying 'The RSC would like to hire you'. And I put the phone down, I thought she was taking the piss. Somebody was having a laugh, and I wasn't having it.

JM:

Quite a brutal joke if she'd been running that as a joke!

GR:

I was just like there's no way. I was like [she makes a dialling tone sound]. And she phones back and was like 'why'd you put the phone down?', I said 'Well, something that's not, I mean really??'. She said 'yes this is this is the truth! They want you to go to RSC for 15 months to do these plays, and they also want you to understudy Cleopatra'. I was like, 'are you kidding me?'

So I went, and had the most terrifying, extraordinary, thrilling, exhilarating time there discovering this amazing beautiful language, having the most amazing

glorious teachers who knew Shakespeare inside out and were so generous to me as a dyslexic, and really showed me the way. So that now - I mean you know being a dyslexic, yes I have to do a lot of work you know, I'm kind of ten steps behind everybody else, so you know you have to do a lot of work to get up to speed. And that experience, for me, it just changed my life in terms of storytelling, how I view storytelling, how I view a piece of text, how I view a script and the way the writer works. Yeah it completely and utterly changed my whole life and gave me so much confidence - to the point now where you know, yes it is still daunting, I think it has to be daunting, you have to give it respect. And one of the tricks that I did for myself when I was at the RSC to kind of break down that ooh, it's 400 year old text, every script that I have had - and I really advocate this to any new person who's doing Shakespeare - every new script that I had, so I had three scripts, I would rub out William Shakespeare and put 'Will Spear'. So that it became a modern script, a new script, a new piece of writing, so that there wasn't this huge weight on it ,you know what I mean?

JM:

Yeah, yeah, brilliant idea.

GR:

And so I was able to kind of really trick my mind into seeing it differently, and it really opened up the wonderment for me. That has been really important in the way that I look at my scripts now, and the way that I view Shakespeare. I mean, I don't do that now because it's kind of, it was you know it's been taken out of me, and I understand what it is, and I understand the tools that I have to enter into a Shakespeare text. Doing *Othello* for me was incredible, Mercutio as well was incredible, and all the *Romeo and Juliet*, all those plays that I've done since then, oh you know have really been amazing, amazing experiences, and you know such a joy to say those words. And I think, yeah it's a really good grounding, and a really good kind of stepping stone into other texts.

JM:

Yeah, so drama schools, I used to direct for drama schools, and I did a *Richard III* with a dyslexic actor, a student actor playing Richard III, and it was such an uphill struggle in many ways for that actor, right, like you know to come to it, but because of that hard work, and because he had to get there earlier than everybody else, he had to work harder than everybody else, the performance was like extraordinary, like it was so deep in him, and so like part of him. From what I can say, when you're talking like that is that that obstacle almost becomes a benefit, it has this net gain at the end of it.

GR:

Absolutely, and it gives you access to other things, it gives you access to imagination and heart, and empathy and, you know, instinct is a real... that's where my work is primarily from, is instinct. I really rarely do any research on anything, Shakespeare is probably the only thing that I that I do research on because I have to you know no fear Shakespeare is a God, and to kind of really whittle down and do that work before it is really important I think to get

into those texts, but for me my acting is instinctual, and I think because of my dyslexia, that is like the dial of that, and my imagination is turned up tenfold, and I think you know, as we were saying before, most of the roles that I do are like really vibrant. Or that's what I bring to them anyway, you know vibrant and turned up.

JM:

Definitely. And is that... I think any obstacles, it's a recurring theme on this podcast for any of the actors talk to us, the ones who turn obstacles into opportunities seem to access something even greater. And is that instinct the same when you're choosing roles? Like do you go on your gut, or are you thinking about it and worrying about it, or how does that process...?

GR:

Oh gosh, I definitely go on my gut. And my boredom level.

JM:

[Laughs] What, of when you're reading it, like if you're bored you're not going to do it? Amazing.

GR:

Yeah, why would you put your effort into something that really doesn't grab you? Or you don't see what you can do with it... because there are some scripts where the script's not up to point, but the character is like really interesting, and sometimes that's not the case, you know, and I think yes to be honest in that way, because otherwise you worry what that role could be - and that script could be good for somebody else, you know. I don't have to do everything, as much as I would love to, Let's hold up here, baby, a lot of things can be shared.

JM:

Yes, not too many, but like a few of them... oh God that's brilliant. And I mean that gut's instinct, I feel naturally brings us on to your PlayCrush, the absolutely extraordinary *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. And is this another one of those plays that just got you in the guts, that got your instincts going?

GR:

Well, listen, I have a very, I mean, my kind of history with August Wilson and these plays, like I don't know, I think I was in a stage of my acting career where I was like, you know 'Oh, Black plays, oh God, here we go another one... I want to do something that's not Black, I want to do something, why is it always...' you know? And I think when I first heard of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, it was on at, I think it was the Aldwych, many many many many moons ago, and I thought that's a ridiculous name for a play, ridiculous name for a play, what is that? So didn't go.

JM:

It is an odd name, let's not lie, it's an odd name.

GR:

It is an odd name, I didn't know the history, didn't want to know the history. And then somebody took me to *Fences*, Lenny Henry, at I think that was probably at the Aldwych, or somewhere along that that theatre line, and I was smacked in the face by this extraordinary piece of storytelling, and from then on I was like, what have I been doing? I was like, hooked. I haven't read all of them because, you know, dyslexia – it's very difficult for me to read things, I listen to things most of the time, audio. But *Fences* for me was my in, and I just thought he's such an extraordinary writer, in the way he puts down the mundane of life, of community on the page, and you sit there and you go what am I looking at, I don't understand, this is just like normal every day, this isn't moving, this isn't... and then there's something that just like, he'll pop something in that's just like catalysts, this whole big rip through the space, through the community, and through the characters on stage. And I just think that's... and also it being about the black community. And not really seeing anything like that or reading anything like that before that really captures you know the humour, the vulnerability, the art. You know, talking about *Ma Rainey*, the art, religion, gender, sexuality, you know exploitation. But it's done in a really subtle natural, humanistic... is that a word?

JM:

It should be a word if it's not a word.

GR:

It just makes my heart pound and beat you know, and just gets me sitting on the edge of my seat.

JM:

And that's great plays isn't it, that's when you know you've got a great play on your hands, when you hear that.

GR:

Absolutely, great storytelling. It's storytelling for me, is a really big... because yes you can have great plays, but it's the storytelling for me, Joe, that I think really grabs me, and it's what I want to do as an actor, I want to be a storyteller first and foremost. And storytelling to me, it's about music, it's about heartbeat, it's about soul, it's about sweat, it's about skin, it's about your brain, do you know what I mean? It's all of those things that I think August Wilson really taps into in his plays and *Ma Rainey*, you know for me. I saw the film recently, the amazing film with Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman. And I think that's why I'm talking about it with you today, because then I went back and read the play after I'd seen that film, and was just like god, oh my god, you know, this is just so incredible. And you know, what's going on for me as well in *Bridgerton*, and my life, and storytelling at the moment, I really relate to *Ma Rainey*. And I was saying to my partner, having closed the last page of it you know, going God, this takes me back to some really difficult memories as a Black actor, being rejected for work, that really taps into that kind of... not exploitation as such, but I don't know. I was told once that I was 'too exotic' and 'my eyes were too close together' to play a part that I had been playing on tour already.

JM:

Oh my god, what, oh my God.

GR:

But this was for a screen version of it. And that really affected me, Joe, to the point, and this relates to the trauma in *Ma Rainey*. When I got the news that I wasn't gonna get the part that I had been playing on tour for a year, I was... I basically beat up a wardrobe. I tore that thing apart. And it really, and *Ma Rainey* triggered that memory for me, just in terms of the frustration that you know, black artists have with the rejection that they get. And how you know, I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, because I didn't understand the feedback. I couldn't do, I can't do anything about the way I look, or where my eyes are placed. Do you know what I mean? I can't do anything about that. So it really broke my heart, because you know, I'm a great believer in going, 'Okay, let's take the negatives, let's take the note, take the note', you know from a director, because then you can do something about it - I can fix it, I can make it work, I can create something out of that negativity. I was helpless, I was helpless in that moment. And another moment where I had done a few of the workshops of this piece - I'm not going to name any of these things because I don't think it's relevant - I think the relationship with this play and my emotional connection to the traumas of the rejection is important. So, another thing that I'd been doing most of the workshops for, and I advocated for the role, I really wanted to do the role, but I was told I wasn't black enough. And again, I was older and wiser when this news came, but I was like, this is extraordinary, that we're using this language still using this language, to cast roles, to manipulate, and yeah it was quite extraordinary, and you know to this day I don't understand it. And I hope in my heart of hearts that we, there's definitely a long way to go, but I hope in my heart of hearts, with *Bridgerton* and people like Shonda Rhimes, Tyler Perry Oprah Winfrey, Ava DuVernay, these people of colour –

JM:

– Steve McQueen at the moment as well

GR:

- Steve McQueen, exactly brilliant, brilliant put in there, you know that these black and brown artists have worked their way up to the top of the food chain, that then you know have a place at the table, that these stories, these actors, these you know, yeah, black and brown, the black and brown community can be represented. All communities can be represented, let's say. That there is inclusivity and representation there, you know. It's starting, it's definitely starting and I have great great hope, and there's a long long way to go, but you know going back to *Ma Rainey* and the kind of, gosh, how August Wilson really captures that trauma, you know. I have an understanding of that, Joe, I really do.

JM:

I mean, you know, it's amazing to hear those sort of incredibly personal experiences. I mean, because I'm a white male, right, like you know my levels of privilege mean I just haven't had to witness that or experience that, and so

it's harrowing to hear that and I feel like those stories are being told more, but as you say it's just at the beginning, and we start so far behind the line, there's so much catching up to do. And was Queen Charlotte, was there a sense of vindication in there you know, or some breakthrough in kind of going from those two experiences, that role, did it feel like a shift? Did it feel like something different, did it feel like a catharsis?

GR:

Absolutely. And why it felt different was the people at the top who we were working with you know Chris Van Dusen, who is the showrunner and writer and creator of *Bridgerton* really created a space where for the first time I felt seen. For the first time I knew I belonged. There's a language now which I think is really interesting, there's a change in the language. So before you had colour-blind casting, and now you have colour-conscious casting, which I think is something that Shondaland and Chris are trying to advocate in the way that we speak about *Bridgerton* and how it was cast. For me, colour-blind casting has the word blind in it, why would you be blind to the colour of a person's skin? That's completely, it's completely wrong, let's say it. Because I think that language created a space where consciousness wasn't involved in the casting, there was a kind of 'oh yes let's do this, let's cast the black person, but let's look the other way' kind of thing, there wasn't any responsibility taken.

JM:

It lets you off the hook, that kind of casting.

GR:

Yeah exactly, it lets you off the hook, perfectly put. If you are conscious in your casting, consciously casting black and brown people in those roles, you are an ally, you are open, there's a more open dialogue, isn't there? People can see what you're doing do you know what I mean? And I've only kind of, I'm only just kind of discussing this now, it's a very new thing that I've gone, oh wow this is really interesting, you know, this is a different way of looking at casting, and the language is different - one language is closed, the other one is open, more generous. And I think definitely the empowerment that I felt working, or that I feel, working for Shonda Rhimes and Chris Van Dusen, it's extraordinary, I've never felt that before. I mean even going into my makeup fittings and wig fittings at the moment, you know, they talk to me about the texture of my hair, and how they can incorporate that into the wigs. So you know you saw dreadlocks, the Queen wearing dreadlocks, the Queen you know having little... I have on my hairline some kind of baby hairs, so we incorporated that into the wigs. You know to sit down and talk to the makeup designer, and for her to say, right so there are so many different shades within your skin tone, within black people's skin, it's not just one skin tone. The lighter you get, the less colours you have in your skin, right, the darker you are, the more colours you have in your skin. And it's about creating a foundation, let's say that matches your skin, so you take from different colours to make one colour for that person. I've never had those conversations, Joe, never, never in my career.

JM:

I've been very privileged to sort of just sit in on a lot of conversations recently, and from artists of colour, a big thing has been skin, makeup, hair and wigs. The assumption that all the white people can just have it done, the person of colour just kind of has to deal with themselves, because the designer hasn't been trained in that context, hasn't been told that's important context. So it sounds quite revolutionary, although it could sound small if one didn't know the previous experience, it sounds quite revolutionary that that has been on a show like that, has been taken into such consideration, and with such I suppose a white dominated genre as well, that's what's kind of exciting about it.

GR:

Yeah I mean, you know, let's not dismiss *Downton Abbey*, *The Crown*, and Jane Austen and all of those Sunday night dramas, the period dramas that we were all brought up on, I definitely was brought up on. Let's not dismiss those, you know, they had their place, and they still have their place for those who want to create them. But I think times are changing and I think *Bridgerton* definitely opens the door, or squashes those conversations that have been had over the years of going 'oh we can't find black actors' or 'in this time it just didn't work', or you know, those kind of discussions. Yeah, there is place now for a more broader discussion to be had.

JM:

Definitely, and I sort of feel like that's what Ma is kind of fighting for, in *Ma Rainey*, she's having to fight for that space so hard, isn't she, whilst it's kind of besieged from so many different angles.

GR:

But yeah, everybody, yeah absolutely she's the dominant one, definitely, but I think you know Levee as well is fighting, is fighting for his future, you know. There was a thing that I was reading about his yellow shoes, and about how you know the kind of August Wilson, all the way through all of his plays has kind of metaphors, and kind of you know the things that symbolise stuff, and the yellow shoes for Levee kind of symbolises his ego, symbolises his pride and you know his kind of attitude towards his own talent, and all of that stuff, and the shoes all the way through, he begins with a kind of a flourish of positivity, of hope and you know he's gonna make it... and then end up kind of as his downfall. And I think a lot of the characters, and the black community at that time, and possibly now, have that kind of, that journey, and the downfalls are less, I would say you know...

JM:

Yes hopefully there's a turning of that tide, yeah I mean it's sort of taken a hundred years nearly to sort of even get near it, which feels kind of shocking. I also think something about Levee that's so sad as well, as there's this sort of insidious nature of oppression, because his anger doesn't go up to Irvin or Sturdyvant the other producer, his anger goes sideways to friends and family, and I feel like oppression does that, it pushes everything downwards including

anger and vengeance, and I find that so sad and so extraordinary, the way August put his finger on that in the writing of the play.

GR:

Yeah, I mean you know we only know about the tragedy and the conflict between black and white, don't we, that's kind of the thing that is at the forefront. We never kind of hear, or well I mean, I hear, but I don't know whether, you know, the community or the world kind of hears of the conflict within colour, within black community, within... and these guys in *Ma Rainey* are quite nasty to each other, are quite brutal to each other.

JM:

As is Ma as well, isn't she? I suppose, what the play in some way proves is that Ma's brutality was necessary to hold the space, which is also... it's just sadness upon sadness upon sadness, it's just brilliantly written.

GR:

Yeah and that determination of a black woman at that time to not be taken for... you know it's so complex, isn't it, because she is taken for a ride, but her defiance absolutely is necessary and her kind of determination, but then she understands that she's being taken for a ride

JM:

Yeah I mean, it's an astonishing play, and I'm so glad you chose it as you PlayCrush. It's the first August Wilson we've had on PlayCrush, and for anyone who hasn't read it, the Pittsburgh Cycle is like, unbelievable.

GR:

Yeah I'm going to try and get, I'm going to try and get through that if I can. You know Denzel Washington has had the rights to do all of the Pittsburgh Cycle?

JM:

As movies?

GR:

To put into film, yeah

JM:

It's so good because they've done *Fences* and now *Ma Rainey*

GR:

Yeah he's going to do one every year apparently.

JM:

Oh man, what a treat that'll be, to have that, and I feel like they're being quite, for anyone who wants to watch, it is quite loyal to the play - like they're not shifting much of it around.

GR:

Yeah they're not shifting, and you know what I find fascinating as well is when you watch them as a movie you still get a feeling of the play.

JM:

Yeah definitely. Well look, thank you so much, it's been such a privilege to chat to you today and be so open and sharing all your experiences and your thoughts on this extraordinary play, I really appreciate it.

GR:

Most welcome sir, most welcome.

JM:

Thank you so much for being on, and we'll hopefully speak soon.

GR:

Yes, stay safe my friend.

JM:

You too, bye!

Thanks so much for tuning in everyone. If you enjoyed this episode of PlayCrush, we would really appreciate it if you could rate, review and subscribe as it helps other people find the podcast.

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