

Transcript of PlayCrush podcast Series 2, Episode 5 | Isobel Waller-Bridge, *Woyzeck*

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JOE MURPHY:

Hello everyone and welcome to PlayCrush. It's Joe Murphy here. We have a great episode this week with one of my favorite human beings on the planet, Isobel Waller-Bridge.

Iso is a composer and sound designer probably best known for her soundtrack of mega-hit *Fleabag*, but that's just the tip of the iceberg of Iso's extraordinary career. She's written music for TV, film, theatre and the concert hall, with credits ranging from *Black Mirror* to ITV's 2018 adaptation of *Vanity Fair*. She writes contemporary classical music with the same fluency that she brings to jazz and Electronica. As the Financial Times said of her work, 'Compare her techno-style soundtrack for The Old Vic's *Woyzeck* with her neo-renaissance "Kyrie" in the second series of *Fleabag* - a flamboyant crossbreed of Pergolesi and Carl Orff - and you'd be astonished that they came from the same person'. I couldn't agree more, though I think Iso would agree that her career highlight was writing the theme tune for the PlayCrush podcast, right Iso? Iso is so talented, smart, funny and creative, so it was such a pleasure to sit down and talk through her meteoric rise and her thoughts on theatre, music and everything else.

Iso's play crush was *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner, adapted by Jack Thorne. The multi-award-winning Jack Thorne (*This is England*, *Let the Right One In*, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*) breathes new life into *Woyzeck*, one of the most extraordinary plays ever written. It's 1980s Berlin, the Cold War rages and the world sits on a crossroads between capitalism and communism. On the border between East and West, a young soldier and the love of his life are desperately trying to build a better future for their child, but the cost of escaping poverty is high in this searing tale of the people society leaves behind. Büchner, who wrote the original, probably began writing the play between June and September 1836. It's loosely based on the true story of Johann Christian Woyzeck, a Leipzig wig maker who later became a soldier. In 1821 *Woyzeck*, in a fit of jealousy, murdered Christiane Woost, a widow with whom he'd been living. He was later publicly beheaded. Büchner's work remained in a fragmentary state at the time of his early death in 1837. He was only 23 years old. It's often described as the first working-class tragedy. Iso actually worked on this production with me at The Old Vic and it was a real pleasure to revisit it and get to talk about it with her again. So, without further ado, here is Isobel Waller-Bridge with *Woyzeck*.

Hello Iso.

ISOBEL WALLER BRIDGE:

Hi Joe

[At the same time] How are you?

JM:

Oh we're so polite, so British! I am fine, more importantly how are you doing?

IWB:

I'm good, yeah, I'm alright... I am in my studio

JM:

Where the magic happens

IWB:

Where the magic happens, yeah. It's sort of nearly there, I was trying to sort of build it over the last three months, and it got so paused in lockdown, and now everything's sort of come back to life, so it's exciting.

JM:

Nice! Yeah I mean, talk to us, what is like, what's the studio like, what have you got in front of you? What's the kit you need, how does it work for you?

IWB:

Well I've got... the most exciting bit of it is I got my... I have a baby grand and that was in storage for about seven years, because I didn't have anywhere for it in the flats that I've been living in, there was no space for it. So I took that out of storage and that is on my left by the window, and so I can, and I'm on the second floor so I've got a lovely view which is good, and then I've got screens sort of everywhere for the film stuff, and there's a sofa and lots of lamps, it's just a very dark room when I'm writing.

JM:

Now back in the day when I was fortunate to last work with you, which must be a couple of years ago now, this does not sound like the studio I sat in - have you have you upgraded a bit since then?

IWB:

I have upgraded, oh my goodness that studio! I think of that studio with great fondness, so much music was written in that studio. It was squashed for the both of us, it was tiny wasn't it? It was also windowless.

JM:

It was.

IWB:

Literally you couldn't do, I mean it was... it was basically, there was enough room for a chair. Someone actually... I did a project and someone came in, it was a director that came in, and had to sit on the floor for the entire time. So yeah, this is this is better now!

JM:

You've got studio 2.0 and I like that.

IWB:

Yeah it's actually, it's just a bit of space which is good. But I do, I was grateful for that little studio,

JM:

Yeah I loved it, I mean it was a sort of airless terrifying box room, and for the claustrophobic amongst us it was punchy...

IWB:

Yeah it wasn't necessarily... not having any natural light, I realise it's a real it's a it's a big thing. I actually had to leave that studio because I think I had some sort of PTSD from not having natural light, it was intense... but yes, so things are better now.

JM:

Yeah, I mean I also remember that studio with great fondness, and it felt like you could be very creative there but you did often emerge very pale from it as well.

IWB:

Yes I think there were definitely some skin problems that happened when I was still in that studio with no light, sort of vampiric... But yeah it was crazy, and also because I was doing so much, I was juggling so much over the kind of two, maybe three years, that I was in that room that I was sort of doing those things you know, when you kind of work for four hours and then sleep for two and work for four and sleep for two, and just doing that sort of round the clock for some time, just weeks and weeks. I don't know who's in there now actually, I feel that studio holds a lot of energy, I don't know who's taken over it.

JM:

Yeah they can't figure out why they can't sleep more than two hours a night now, they're just like 'I don't understand!'. And, as the brilliant composer that you are, is space important, you know, I just wonder, the rooms that you're in, where you go to create your stuff - does that have an impact on your creativity, and has moving for example changed things up at all?

IWB:

Yeah massively, space is everything I think. It's funny because I'm really weird about who I let into the studio as well, because I've had some experiences where I've let someone in and they've sort of changed the energy of the room, and then I've had to kind of air the room for about a week, just to let that out or sort of like ... I don't know, it's not quite, I couldn't have been any sage in the last place... [Joe laughs] but it was that sort of feeling, so I'm really protective over it, and it's taken me ages to get this room right. Everything about, I think, I'm just, I like symmetry and kind of the colours are really important, and it does, it really impacts, because I sort of I live in my studio and I sort of sleep at home, but I do spend kind of ten hour days in

here... so it's got to be a place that I really feel safe in, and want to come to and you know, that I know that it's totally private. So yes, no, it's really really important. It's more important than my house. It sort of is my house.

JM:

Well I feel I feel very privileged to have been let in.

IWB:

Yeah I know I can't wait for you to come this one!

JM:

Oh yeah I'll bang out a few tunes on the grand piano, the baby grand. That's interesting because in your last one again you only had, I mean it's a serious piece of kit, but it was like the sort of electronic keyboard, and is there something also about having you know the slightly more analog version there?

IWB:

Yeah definitely, because the piano is my instrument and why I just got into writing music, and it is my sort of it is my dearest and longest relationship that I've had. It's a dear friend. And so the music that I write on the real piano is different to what I write on a on electric, on a keyboard. That's also because you have the natural harmonics on the piano and it sort of gives you lots of different sort of ideas. It's not as quick, I think I'm much slower when I'm writing on the piano, but I think the ideas are better. It was really was so minimal that other studio, which I also do quite like, I don't like too much sort of technical things - they can get in the way sometimes. They can be really inspiring, because you know once you sort of run everything through, if you've got an idea and then just run it through loads of pedals and things like that, that can be really triggering in a good way for sort of different for your imagination, but I think too much too much kind of nonsense can sometimes be a real good way of me procrastinating. [Joe laughs]

So I have to be quite controlled about the number of things that I have around me. But I've had some fun this time, I've got some good like cool bits, I've got a lot of plants here.

JM:

Oh nice, so you've got some sort of nature in there as well.

IWB:

Yeah, things to keep alive.

JM:

So important, so important! Especially spending 10 hour days in there. Is that regular, is it that kind of length of day for you when you're in creating mode?

IWB:

Yeah, I've tried to change the way I work. I'm like deeply, deeply trying to change it, because I'm really, I work better at night and it's so annoying

because I wish... I'm quite an early riser these days and I sort of I come into the studio and I just I don't know what I do, and then until it's not until like four o'clock that I really start writing properly. And then I go until, you know, midnight or something and it's very frustrating. I am trying to, I don't know what it is, whether it's a discipline... I think it's just my brain prefers it, there's something about the evening that is really wonderful because it does become like stolen time. It is really private and no one's going to call you, emails kind of stop and shut down. So that does feel, that's where the sort of intimacy of the work really kind of kicks off.

JM:

Well, what's interesting I suppose, particularly about your work as a musician is - it's almost purely collaborative isn't it? You're in a project, whether that's TV, film, theatre, and so it's less like you can kind of disappear and make the music you want to make and more, you do seem to have to respond to like other people's needs, demands, deadlines, production budgets, production schedules. So again, you've got that weird meeting point between I suppose the kid who sat in front of a piano at the beginning who just wants to write music, and the adult who wants to be part of a collaborative process and with other human beings, and how frustrating it can get when other people get involved and make you do all those things you don't want to do.

IWB:

Well it's funny because the collaboration, collaborating with people is literally my favourite thing to do, creative collaborations. And they are actually, they motivate me to write music, so that is, I find writing music on my own - which is something you know just for myself, which is something that I've been sort of doing a bit more recently - I find that very difficult. I'm finding a way sort of through it to kind of find ways to inspire myself, or stimulate myself in a kind of different way, so that I do feel like I'm collaborating with myself so that I'm not sort of in the void. But when I work with other people, that's really what I wanted to do really from the very beginning, because I think when writing music for me is all about sort of storytelling, and my favourite thing to do is to tell those stories with other people.

JM:

Well, great, then let's, if you're up for it, let's just sort of track that back a bit and kind of walk through where that started for you, and how that's come to this point of, you know, amazing success, and really almost ubiquitous, you know, like everywhere I look there's some amazing piece by Iso Waller-Bridge, doing something either on TV or on stage or a film. It's really thrilling, and maybe we start with that first collaboration you were talking about, which was you and the piano. And I love how you described it as like your oldest relationship, and is that where music started for you, was it at the piano, and when did that happen?

IWB:

Yeah, oh definitely. I was, I think my parents put me in front of a piano when I was four. There's a photo of me sitting at a piano when I was four and just sort of making sounds on it and making noise, and it just, it was one of those

funny things that just I connected with it instantly. I think I must've done, I don't remember exactly what that felt like or you know anything like that, but I do know that that was that it was that early on. And it just became all the way through, you know sort of prep school, I started, I was learning it and we had a little piano at home and then I was sort of learning other instruments. But the piano, really when I was in my teens I was on a music scholarship at school at secondary school and so it was wonderful because I was sort of actively encouraged to kind of go away, you know, I could go and spend hours and hours in a practice room, because you know that was that was the reason you know that was what the scholarship was about. And so the solitude that comes with it, I really love. I really enjoyed that from early on and the discipline of it, it's really you get you the you sort of get instant gratification from practicing and I really love that, because then you suddenly you know you'd improve and then you perform it and that was really exciting.

And then I would just take my feelings to it so you know and then at school I was playing lots of you know repertoire things so the composers that I really went to were kind of Rachmaninoff and Schubert and Schuman, and then to listen to kind of Mahler and the sort of really romantic composers... so it really was all feeling.

JM:

Yes forgive my ignorance, I am deeply ill-versed in great musicians or anyone sort of pre-1960 really, and I don't even know why I've claimed that, as if I'm cool enough to know music from the 60s... but like so when you say those composers, and you say it's all about feeling, are they particularly known for the passion of the work or something?

IWB:

Yeah I think so, I think in a sort of, yeah they're really, they don't hold anything back. There's something with the classical composers, I think it's really interesting, well to me it is, that with the classical composers for the Mozart and Haydn, and they're much more formulaic and the harmonies are kind of perhaps, they feel and sound a bit more traditional, and maybe they're a bit more predictable, I think. But then once we get into sort of the romantic composers the harmony starts becoming a bit more complex and the form starts to kind of break a bit, and so it really they can feel quite wild. And these are my guys, like I really love them! And when I found them, I connected, and I really love playing them on the piano, it just it's a good channel. And then I started really started composing at school and started writing for kind of friends and for me to play as well, never really songs interestingly, that was never it, it was always sort of instrumental. And then I went to university and studied composition, but really I was always writing kind of concert hall music, and really sort of atonal. Qe used to call it kind of squeaky gate music.

JM:

[Laughing] What does that mean? Squeaky gate music!

IWB:

It's not very melodic. So my poor mum... Oh my goodness, I remember it with

such fondness. So basically I wrote a piece that I was really proud of actually, for a trombone and a light switch, and that was you know... and called it *Crayon*. [Joe laughs]. And I was like going through that, and I really thought it was so... it was really really atonal, it was basically any kind of sounds that weren't... and actually to be honest I still love that, but it's more actually sort of what we call it now is sound design, I think. But what I was writing that then it was sort of more textural, rather than melodic.

JM:

Sorry, is this university we're at?

IWB:

Yeah university and so I was in an experimental band which was... important.

JM:

What were they called, what were you called?

IWB:

We were called Tangent... of course. I can't remember who came up with that. But we would, I mean it was actually these were the days, I loved it so much. There were six of us in the band, this is actually I've now skipped forward to my post grad, and it was me on the piano but I didn't actually ever play any of the keys, I was only kind of inside the piano sort of scrabbling around inside, and I'd put you know ping-pong balls in the piano and just make sounds, then there was a trumpet player and a cellist and we had electro and a guy sort of doing live electronics, then we had a sort of video projection going, but we never wrote anything pre the performances, it was our thing was that it was sort of improvised... it was very exciting for us I think [Joe laughing loudly] I didn't know how exciting it was for the people that... although like we used to perform in sort of carpeted rooms, you know with like in office rooms with sort of eight chairs and a few people would come and see it. But then we used to... but then actually weirdly, we got signed.

JM:

Of course, Tangent, the next big thing!

IWB:

Yeah of course and then, oh it's so lovely though, well we got signed to this contemporary music label called ... oh my god I can't even remember what it's called... but we used to sort of so we did we made a record that actually my brother dug it out the other day and sounds like a horror film score or something like that. It's quite sort of interesting but I don't know how... we and then we sort of were playing you know we're performing in churches, but the favourite bit is that we sort of be doing all this and we were so earnest, it was so good and we were so like alive with information, you know, kind of music and articles and we need to go to the pub, and talk about music for kind of hours and drink pints that cost a pound, you know. I mean I loved those days it's so good, and it's but it's interesting how they were really important, because it meant I started writing in a way that wasn't traditional really. And was really encouraged to experiment and also had my comrades, so we were

all sort of doing it together, and I think that's why I got really interested in sound design when I eventually started doing theatre, I really think it broke open my imagination in that way.

JM:

That's amazing. I mean I want to see Tangent, can we do some kind of like a reunion gig? I would love it. And that's kind of interesting just to talk about that difference, because it sounds like at the moment so far I mean we must be in early 20s now - in terms of your life it's been like all music all the time. But I would say a great deal of success and renown, it has come from film, TV and stage. So how did that transition begin?

IWB:

Well it's interesting, I sort of was writing all the music for the concert hall and for and for soloists and things like that, and then there were two strands really in terms of the film stuff and the theatre stuff. I started when we were in our sort of mid-20s I think I started doing a bit of work with DryWrite which was Phoebe and Vicki's little theatre company - and is that how you and I met, did we meet through DryWrite?

JM:

Yes I think we did, I think there was a sort of – nabokov was a theatre company I was running at the time, and I think there's a little nabokov – DryWrite theatre hook up and that's how we met.

IWB:

That's right... so I was doing bits and pieces with them which was really fun, but what I was also doing at the time I was doing my post grad I had a part-time job with an orchestra and I set up a scheme with that orchestra to, they weren't playing any kind of contemporary music from any contemporary living composers, young composers really. Which was, you know I really felt that because I wasn't having any my music performed you know, the facility no one was sort of facilitating that. So I proposed this to this orchestra and they said sure go for it so I set up the scheme and then I invited, I got the National Gallery involved, and we did this and it was a whole sort of competition and then at the end of you know, the final pieces were then looked at by film composers, and also there was a sort of there were a mix of composers, they weren't all film composers, but it was through that that I met a film composer and went to go and assist him. I'd never even been in a sort of film composer's studio, but then when I was working with him he said you must go and do theatre. He was like 'film will make you famous, TV will make you rich, and theatre will make you good'. I think that's really true, I mean I'm yet to sort of experience the other two things, the money or the fame, but I do think I believe so deeply that theatre it is essential, I really do. I think it's so important in terms of learning about process and your own you know and particularly about with collaborating. So then I went to go and see Matthew Scott who at the time was ahead of music at the National Theatre and then Matthew got me sort of assisting Stephen Warbeck.

JM:

The man himself

IWB:

The man himself. He's an absolute dream, and at the time he was writing the music for *Welcome to Thebes* which was in the Olivier, and I'll never forget it, I will absolutely never forget it, I went in on the first day of the tech and there were live musicians, I can't remember who was doing the sound design, but there was this one scene where this helicopter... I never heard anything like it, this helicopter had to kind of come in over the auditorium and then sort of you know sound like it was landing, and it was utterly amazing, and the whole world of it, that you know there was the set design was incredible... it was really interesting seeing Stephen's process. That made me feel a lot better about my process, but it was also really interesting because that was the first time that I saw the speed at which a composer works in theatre, because you know when he when the scene changes were happening, and because as we all know you have no time, really you've got like minus time, it seems somehow. So he was rewriting things kind of really quickly, and then he had his assistant he was printing out the scores and running them down to the players, and everything was just happening you know at the rate of knots, and that was the first time that I saw that and I really understood then why it was going to be really important to work in theatre. And I was already sort of in love with the storytelling, but it was then that I knew that sort of it was literally a kind of oh I've this is where I want to be, this is a home, and yeah vivid was that was that experience. So that started really and then I just kept on doing kind of bits of assisting work and then but you know and then like you and I we were doing our little shows.

JM:

We were... The shows that we're working on I'm trying to think, probably *Blink* was the first one we did?

IWB:

Yeah you gave me I think you gave me my first gig.

JM:

Yeah I mean I'm claiming that for sure.

IWB:

You definitely did!

JM:

When you win a Grammy I want that mentioned.

IWB:

Your name does spring to the front of my brain.

JM:

When you think Grammy, you think Murphy.

IWB:

I remember that because, oh it was so joyful, I remember I loved that show written by Phil Porter wasn't it?

JM:

Another titan.

IWB:

Another legend. Yeah, it was really gorgeous, and I remember doing that and that was what was so lovely, because actually I would say that our process has remained the same as that yeah, I mean you may just you might disagree with that, but I feel like it is sort of quite similar.

JM:

No, 100%. As far as I remember, our process is me sort of blathering at you for a while and then like genius coming back at me in the form of music and me going 'oh yeah that's what I meant definitely'.

IWB:

I love it. What's so great about your process which I really like is you have ideas really early on which is so useful, which I really love. I think even with *Blink* you sort of talked about how you know how you sort of what how you wanted it to feel, which is something that I always find really useful. I find feelings more sort of, I can interpret those you know in a more interesting way I think than be then sometimes directors can be quite prescriptive about instruments, and that's also fine but it's also, I guess, yeah talking about feelings is a way that I like to talk about music, rather than talking about it through instruments.

JM:

And is that your, is that what is that would you describe that as your process and the sense like to attempt to translate feelings, or to is it that you want the audience to feel those same feelings, or like is there how does that work for you? You read a script, you talk to the team, you get the idea of the feelings. What's your sort of next, what do you do next?

IWB:

Well always I'll sort of go away for about I don't know a couple of days, when I've got the... so the script is always the place really where I'll start, and just read it a few times and so to try and locate the kind of pivotal scenes, the pivotal sort of relationship points, and sort of those things to sort of really get into the soul of the play and the journey of the characters. And then what I'll try and do is start sort of sketching some ideas but also what I will be really interested in always and whatever the medium, is to see some visuals. I'm such a visual person and I think the design of a show, because the director and the designer have been working probably for much longer than the

composer has been on board for, you can tell so much from what the vision is of the director and from the design. And so any even kind of visual references like paintings or moods, basically it's sort of like creating a kind of a mood board and then I would sort of create a little musical mood board which will be just little sketches and sounds - like a little library of sounds that I'll sort of start to either make or build. And then we'll start probably... I won't start writing sort of scene change music, I'll just start kind of scoring what I think the play sounds like. That was one of the things actually that Stephen Warbeck said to me right at the beginning is that you've got to learn how to hear a play, and which was also so useful because you know it's so much about the work that you do sort of pre-rehearsals, which is just based on the script, based on any visuals that you can get you know your hands on and also kind of lots and lots of talking to the director and just hanging out actually as well, I really like that you know you just want to get to know the personality of the person that you're working with.

But then also once you get into the room, it's really the actors' voices, you know, the how they sound what the timbre of their voices is and what they are and because you want everything that is happening in the aesthetic of the music to complement everything that you're hearing in that space. So I find that you know when you've got, if there's an actor with a particularly low bassy voice, I'll really think about what kind of sounds, not even for underscoring, but just sort of in terms of just how to carry the feeling of that person's voice into the music through the scene change, and then into the next scene. And sort of, so really it's like you want I feel like I want to carry the fabric of the piece and the fabric of the actors in the music through the show. So yeah, I think that's like broadly kind of how I always know that I'm going to approach it and then I tend to kind of try and get in quite early with material, I'm really not very precious about the music that I write for when I'm collaborating with people, because I don't think it serves... well certainly in my experience, it doesn't, you know your ego is a thing I think obviously everyone you know can everyone has a bit of a tussle with their ego now and again, but I think when you're collaborating with people I think it's really important that you keep that in check and that you know that I know that what the music is doing is supporting the vision of the director and the writer. And that my opinion and my own kind of musical vision for that is present and I've like voiced it and that feels good, but also that if somebody doesn't like a cue, it's not the end of the world, it's not going to be a problem

For me it's a much healthier way to work, to kind of to not be very precious about it because also I know that if I've had an idea it's not like that idea then goes away forever, it will turn up probably, it just wasn't meant for that that piece, it will turn up in another way somewhere else, and that so that's sort of there's a comfort in that I think.

JM:

Yeah for sure, I mean it's a great, it's I think it's in *Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard or something, he says 'nothing's ever lost, you just pick it up the next time around'

Well, maybe then let's you know, now that we're talking about process and specifics, maybe let's move on to your PlayCrush which is *Woyzeck*. And I'm guessing that your PlayCrush is Jack Thorne's version of *Woyzeck* that we worked on together.

IWB:

Yes! I mean Jack...

JM:

Yeah, I mean next level right, absolutely next level. And I think like as a director when I'm working or indeed when I've worked with you as a composer, I think we both get off on writers right? Like it's writers are like the beating heart of the show for me, and I think Jack really typifies that, especially in this version. I mean so I'll just do a little recap for those listening who don't know the play. *Woyzeck* was written by Georg Büchner in about 1836, I think he's about 23 years old when he wrote it and he died halfway through writing it, so it's this unfinished play about a man called Woyzeck. And I mean it's so hard when you get to talk about this play to like a plot overview because they're sort of shards of scenes almost and even the order that they come in isn't clear so over the last few hundred years directors, writers, artists of all walks of life have reimagined this play. It sort of centres around a young man called Woyzeck who is, I mean, it's hard to explain really, I suppose he's sort of... well it's the dehumanising effects I suppose of the way that doctors and the military have on this young man who's in the army. It's often seen as the first working-class tragedy, though it can also be viewed as a so as a human jealousy tragedy, and it's based on a real story there's a guy called Johan Christian Woyzeck who is a Leipzig wig maker and he later became a soldier, and then in 1821 in a fit of jealousy he murdered a widow with whom he'd been living, and then he was beheaded for that. And Büchner was inspired by that, I think to look at like what could drive somebody to that rather than blaming the individual looking at the society and the system I suppose around him - in terms of particularly in this play the medical and the military systems that might abuse and push someone to do such a thing.

But then the reason I struggle explaining I suppose is because then what Jack did was just such an exciting radical departure, he sort of turned it into this extraordinary play set in the 80s, set in Berlin, a young British officer on the Berlin wall... and he sort of turned into a love story really between him and Marie and the ultimate tragedy of course is that despite the fact that Woyzeck is sort of oppressed and exploited by the military these are part of and by medical science through a drug trial, in Jack's version of the play, as so often happens, the pain, fear, anger of that oppression - instead of going back up to the people doing the oppression - it goes outwards to those around us to those we most love to those who share that oppression, and the explosion then results in Woyzeck murdering Marie. But again what Jack did so sensitively I thought was to look at like, let's not look at the individual's culpability, let's look at the system's culpability, and how are we all complicit in that. Do you think that's a fair understanding of Jack's version of the play?

IWB:

Yes.

JM:

And a very long one.

IWB:

That was absolutely excellent. It was so good, so good to hear that because it's been such a long time since we've spoken about this play, this version, it was just that was really really great to hear that.

JM:

I mean well it was it was so exciting to revisit Jack's version ahead of this conversation and again, what does Jack does so interestingly I think in the play is, it's quite naturalistic drama in a way, in the character interaction, but the POV is Woyzeck, so as he starts to lose his grip on reality the production loses its grip on reality.

IWB:

Exactly, yeah.

JM:

And I think the genius there from Jack was, watching a man trying to stay sane rather than watching a man going insane is a much more provocative offer. But the music world for that, I imagine, was really exciting because it was on the one how we have the 80s, greatest decade of all time (bold claim), and on the other hand we had the decreasing mental stability of our protagonists. Did those offer some interesting provocations for you?

IWB:

Oh, 100%. I mean that really was like, that was it, because I remember when you and I first had that conversation we thought okay we're in the 80s, and I remember you saying it let's start playing around with synths, and *one* of us had been watching too much *Stranger Things* at the time and...

JM:

That might have been me...

IWB:

I do remember that but that was extremely... I mean I was also obsessed with *Stranger Things* so it was like to me, being asked to look at synths, and I hadn't really done a big you know synthy score, but what was really exciting I felt was because you can manipulate synths so much and they can be you know they're not a concrete thing you know, it's not an instrument that has a sound that you instantly recognise, or you know, they're really bendable and in turn when I think about sanity and insanity and somebody being really, you know feelings being really sort of internalised and somebody kind of really freaking out, the idea of using synths in that way was really really interesting to me, particularly as I knew that because of the journeys - what we would

start with was something that could be you know quite melodically sort of, just aesthetically kind of palatable, like we would understand the music at the beginning you know. It would have qualities that would that wouldn't kind of necessarily be that sort of surprising you know, because we'd sort of, we're just establishing the period and we're establishing where we are in the world and nothing too wild, but then knowing that by the end of the play all those synth sounds, I would have just sort of really inverted them, reversed them, squashed them done like terrible terrible things to them to represent the trauma and the internal... yeah the sort of internal agony of Woyzeck. And that, because really at the end when he's really when we really experience him being in his own head and really suffocating and just in you know a diabolical state, that it was really thrilling to me to know that that was the that was broadly what the journey was going to be, and to do that with kind of with synth textures was going to be really exciting, I knew that from the off. And then also I knew that we were going to be working with Gareth Fry –

JM:

Who is another don.

IWB:

An absolute, he's a legend. And so that was also really exciting and I remember sort of having early conversations with Gareth and then him sort of saying you know let's do a swarm here and I was just like I mean everything you know I mean, that word in itself, I was excited to sort of do that. So what was fun about it is that I could at the beginning think about it in terms of the kind of the softer things as well, like you know there was quite a lot of music that was going to be used as underscore, I think we decided early on.

JM:

That's right yeah

IWB:

And sort of quite romantic you know, to really sort of build that that sense of the relationship between Marie and Woyzeck, and the intimacy and the love there and the sort of purity of it I think. And so it was lovely kind of really having you know, that's a really wonderful musical journey that you know when just at the beginning of a process that you know you're going to have to go on. There was even there was some dance in it.

JM:

There was some dance in there

IWB:

Hi Polly Bennett!

JM:

The amazing Polly Bennett, who was so brilliant on that show, and there was a tragedy wasn't there, that sort of sort of mad musical movement piece that we in there had to remove from the show for reasons of my own failing, and nobody else's. But that is the process isn't it, but it was a big 20 minute piece

and you were like wow, Polly and everyone had been working so hard on that.

IWB:

But that's a perfect example of what we were talking about isn't it, about not being precious about things, because the development of that piece and you know the writing of it and the staging of it and everything that we were all involved in, and actually doing, it was really important to the to the atmosphere of the whole show and actually I felt - I you know totally agreed with you that it you know, it had to go. But what it left was the essence of what it was, so it wasn't so I feel like it was an important bit of the process to go through because we had to make that, because we also made it quite early on to sort of understand tonally where we were going in the show I think, and then and I think actually doing that that really sort of informed a lot to do with the rest of the score as well, and so losing it I don't feel like we actually lost it, if you see what I mean. We lost that, we gained time and things like that so that was all I mean it was all really valuable and all really positive, like not how you know it's sort of disappearing, but I really felt like we it was important thing to make.

JM:

I think that's really right and that's a really interesting point, the stuff you remove leaves these echoes behind that in the end almost become the heart of the show.

IWB:

Definitely, because I can't even, when you're writing sort of scene change music I tend to you know I overwrite at the beginning because you always you know for two reasons, I need to overwrite to you know to write something much longer than it's going to end up being because I need to find what the music is, but also I know that it's going to be much easier to cut something down from 40 seconds to 12 seconds rather than it is to write yeah that you know sort of exists as 12 seconds and suddenly needs to be 40, or a minute or something. So you're always cutting things down but I do think I think you're right even when you've got even with scene change music, even if it's very long, I find that I need to have these kind of very long pieces of music to sort of understand what the music is doing and what the sort of really true sound of the show is, and then I can make a six second cue that holds that energy.

JM:

Yes, and I think that's really interesting, that overwriting to then cut down I think is a really interesting part of the process and it seems to me that what you're always chasing in your music is getting us into the character's, like, heart and that's what the music seems to always do for me when I work with you is it breaks the character open for the audience and lets you experience something beyond the dialogue and you can kind of get into them.

And I found that releasing on *Woyzeck*, the way you did obviously like you said it's really melodic kind of quite beautiful almost like a high-end 80s movie synth soundtrack, and then I remember particularly one bit with the... I mean

there's so many legends on this show by the way if we talk about it everyone I mentioned oh my god they're literally the greatest human being on the planet but the amazing Nancy Carroll, who played, oh yeah we're all obsessed with Nancy Carroll, but who played the officer's wife and a sort of haunting almost banshee version of Woyzeck's mother and there's this extraordinary bit where she breastfeeds Woyzeck towards the end and the sound that you and Gareth worked on at that point felt so crunchy and kind of apocalyptic and horrendous... I just wonder like how to have moved from this sort of beautiful melodic synth to what I imagine we were probably hearing the same stuff just crunched up and...

IWB:

Yeah, 100%, totally.

JM:

How does that work for you, how did you and Gareth find that sound to take us into that moment of agony?

IWB:

Well I think, knowing that I wasn't focused from a musical point of view I knew sort of from a concept place I knew that I didn't want to start writing new music to suddenly illustrate these moments of horror, they had to come from the music that's already been written because that's exactly you know, that's how I feel that you can then, that's something that has been sort of quite external then becomes kind of internal. And so just literally took most, like a few cues that I found that, it was almost like taking it from the from the really from the pivotal kind of scenes, so there was a little bit of music from Marie and Woyzeck's kind of love, there was a bit of music from the doctor you know when he starts giving him the pills and everything starts sort of going sideways, and then there was sort of a little bit more of kind of incidental music that I'd written and literally just smushed them together, and like layered them on top of each other, which I really like doing actually is an exercise anyway and then just like f*cked around with it and then sort of showed it to Gareth, played it together and said you know what do you think of this and then he had this really really cool idea of it of how it should be in the space, and then and then we just sort of worked together to make it to make it as really as chilling and as awful and, as a feeling, which I absolutely love doing the music, it's so creepy when sound can do that to you, I think.

And then when what was amazing about it, which is you know because as soon as you see it under lights, you hear it and on the on the stage and things moving you inevitably kind of want to change things, I think, sometimes. As soon as we saw Neil's design his lighting design, Gareth was instantly like I know exactly what we should do we should do this, it needs to come from upstage far upstairs and it needs to kind of come down as Nancy is walking and that was that was that was really I totally agree with you that was the most thrilling part of that kind of whole... as when everything went everything that we were all doing, lights, staging, design, sound and music, it really felt so connected, and it felt like a black hole. It was just great. Yeah that was really exciting, it was really exciting doing that, and also you know having

someone like Gareth, who is so creative as well and also you know when we were in the tech, we were sort of sitting next to each other and just pinging things back and you know between each other the whole time, so what do you think of this and, again like going so fast and that's the other thing about not being precious is because you know you can listen to something on headphones, but you need to listen to it really in the space and being able to just you know feel safe enough to know that when you play a piece of music, it's going to go out to everyone, you know all the actors are going to hear it for the first time, stage management, anyone else that's in the auditorium, you know, loads and loads of people and that can be quite intimidating the first time. It's always quite intimidating when you play the first cut, but then there's total joy when you get to the point of like you know the third preview, and you're in that note session, and you just said there's so much going on and you're cutting everything down and playing things, you know like just back to back, and it's you've got 10 minutes of quiet time.

JM:

And do you, does that thrill you then, that crunch moment? You love that?

IWB:

Yeah, it thrills me, and absolutely, it's like killer isn't it, every time. I don't know that's the thing about a tech, is that I really have to, you have to brace yourself because you it's the same every single time, it is absolutely crazy and it does, I do find it the most exciting thing because when everything starts to come together that's when it becomes thrilling, and you know that all your ideas and some of them work and some of them are really exciting and you know instantly, I tend to as soon as I've like literally the first two notes when I hear them in the space, I kind of know if it's if it's going to go, I think if it's if it's not going to make it, if it's not right, and then you very you have to rewrite, and rewriting in the tech is really fun as well. I think I do mean that though in a way, it's sort of because you're at your sharpest.

JM:

I mean, I'm getting tense just talking about it, I can feel my whole body...

IWB:

Yeah it's funny because I always am a bit haunted after a tech, but it is also my favourite part of the process, so you know I'm always hungry for it again. But it is killer, it takes me about a week to recover.

JM:

Yeah it takes me about a year to recover from a tech, easy. And one thing we haven't had a chance about yet I suppose, talking about tech as well, is Tom Scutt's absolutely extraordinary design. And, I mean really mind-blowing bit of design

IWB:

Yeah that was huge seeing that, seeing what you guys had sort of chosen for that and the reasons why. Because it's interesting, I think it's in the original there weren't any scene changes, it was sort of it performed in the round the

first time *Woyzeck* was performed, which I understood you know about because there is a fluidity that I think is really important in telling of the story, and so what was really exciting about Tom's design is that we didn't have these conventional scene changes, we just had these really kind of imposing... what would you call them, block...

JM:

Yeah block walls, I suppose, there were 25 of them as I recall, and they were individually automated, so they could all move like a jigsaw puzzle really. But they were like the walls behind plasterboard, you know it's like it was the frame of walls and this skeleton of walls

IWB:

And they moved so beautifully, they created as well this fluidity, like it really felt like there it really contributed to the breakdown of his... I think and then what was so exciting I remember when we having those early conversations about how the music would relate how it could they would connect to each block, and I remember us having this really early idea I think maybe it was, I think it was your idea when you said if a sound moves with a wall and then and then another sound moves with the with a another wall when it goes up, and then that creates a harmony, then you can actually create this kind of spectral effect with the music and the walls kind of going at the same time. And I thought that was so brilliant and I think we sort of we were going to have a speaker in each wall that's right

JM:

We did, lots. I mean again that was Gareth, on this sort of speakers everywhere idea you can imagine. That was actually, I wish I could claim that idea, that was Tom Scutt's brilliant idea, which was amazing though I think him as a designer and interesting about how you as a composer react to the design about how he was you know he had to think sonically when he was designing. He was like you'll need these things to make this design work sonically.

IWB:

Yeah, it was really it was really exciting and then and knowing that the music then was being was sort of was again, it's so connected to the design I really think it's a real gift when you've got that, because usually the music, you want it to sort of be doing what, you know, if there's a revolve, you kind of you want the music to move in the same way that the set is I think in the scene changes, and so and so that was something I'd never done before that that they would be sort of isolated sounds, and then all sort of coming together. That was brilliant

JM:

Yeah it's amazing, teams that think like that, that interconnected about all the disciplines light, sound, design, you know when it's all connected it creates a really magical thing. And I think again all that comes back to that script you know the way Jack wrote it anyone out there who hasn't had a chance to read Jack's script, I really do recommend you ordering it, it's an amazing bit of

writing and a real total theatre bit of writing you know, Jack's really thinking about every element that the theatre can do and I think that's really inspiring as a creative.

IWB:

Yeah it really was, it really was. I remember even like going back to when your first you know the first bits of what you respond to, and I remember there was that car park scene.... I feel a bit funny about underscoring it's got, it's such a delicate thing, it doesn't always work because of the nature of you know live theatre, it feels kind of if you're you to have something that's really fixed, you know, it's tricky and but I remember we did so often like with underscoring you try and you still want to be led by the actor really, so you might put in cues that kind of move the music on a bit, but otherwise they sort of get into a kind of, I don't know, if they can sort of feel like they're sort of fighting a rhythm that they don't want to sometimes. But there was that really beautiful scene that Jack had written and that was between Marie and Woyzeck and it was when they were on top of this car park, and it was a long scene, and so what was great about that is that writing a bit of underscore for that - it ended up being a kind of I think I wrote six minutes music at the beginning that which then became three, and then really I think it was I can't remember which week, but it was really early, we're still sitting around the table I think..

JM:

Yeah it was very early, yeah.

IWB:

We played it and that was that was really, that was really wonderful, it's always good getting stuff in the room early I think, as well, as early as possible.

JM:

Yeah, it shapes everything doesn't it, as soon as everyone hears the music, if it's right everyone knows the tone, they're like I get it, I get it, I get it.

IWB:

Oh it's so exciting. I can't wait till we're all back in theatres again, and making, I mean really.

JM:

Yeah me too, me too. Well Iso, thank you so much for coming on and having a chat, it's great to hear everything about your process and about how you got into everything. And just as a little finisher, whether you've got any bits of content you can recommend to listeners out there you know, if they're just looking for something a bit fun - any bits of music you've been listening to, any TV shows you've been watching, any books you've been reading, anything you think ooh... like I've just been revisiting *The Wire*.

IWB:

Oh have you, I've never seen *The Wire*

JM:

Oh my god if you haven't seen *The Wire*, if anybody hasn't seen *The Wire*, turn everything off in your life and just sit down and watch all five series of *The Wire* because it's absolutely...

IWB:

I tell you, I've just started watching *The Sopranos* which I've never watched that and that is amazing, it is absolutely amazing, so I'm doing that and I'm also reading a lot of Anne Carson at the moment, and I absolutely love her well it's actually yeah she's... I'm such a classics kind of nerd and she really is the best so I would recommend, I would recommend anything by Anne Carson

JM:

Nice, so you're saying Anne Carson and *The Sopranos* that's a good mix, amazing. Well, thank you so much Iso

IWB:

Thanks Joe

JM:

Sending you much love.

IWB:

Sending love, bye!

The brilliant Iso there everybody. I loved hearing about theatre from a composer's perspective. The way she thinks about character and translates that into music is really magical.

Thanks so much for listening and continuing to support both the Sherman Theatre and The Old Vic. We really appreciate it. Until next time, go gently and go safely.

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