



## The Political Shaman: An Interview with Matthew Xia

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

Our guest today is Matthew Xia, theatre director, journalist, composer, DJ and Artistic Director of the Actors' Touring Company. In 2020 Xia directed *Reconnect: Digital Raving*, a piece commissioned by BBC Culture in Quarantine and written by Aural/Oral Dramaturgies Artist in Residence SK Shlomo. This was a Covid-19 induced repurposing of a piece that Xia and Shlomo had been working towards for live performance, which is a project they still intend to carry forward into the future.

In this Gallery interview we explore a unique mix of influences that have shaped Xia's approach to theatre-making, including the legacy of Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Royal Stratford East, his commitment to racial justice activism and his passion for British hip hop, which Xia worked hard to promote as DJ Excalibah on his BBC 1Xtra show *Tales from the Legend* in the mid-2000s. We learn about his forays into re-inventing the form of the musical, and his commitment to enabling those without class, gender or racial privilege.

This conversation took place on Zoom on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

### [00:01:45] THE EARLY DAYS

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hi, Matthew! Thank you for making your time available for this project, and for talking to us a bit more about your work! We are interested in your work in a number of ways – we are interested in your particular mix of the DJing experience and the theatre-making experience, and how that's maybe led to a particular way of working that might be quite unique in British theatre, or rare at least. And how that's informing the current project that you are working on with Shlo – with SK Shlomo, who is our Artist in Residence. So, usually, we just go back to the early days, and we ask you when did you discover your love of music and theatre, and how did it come about?

**Matthew Xia:** Well, thank you, first of all, Duška, for making time for me to come and talk to you as well! Going back to the start – god! I feel like it's a story I've told a number of times, but it keeps kind of shifting as I re-contextualise it, I guess, or as I discover more about my own childhood, or think back to my own childhood. So, the story used to go, I think – I was a naughty kid – that's how the story used to go. I'm now exploring why I was a naughty kid – and actually, I think that theatre filled a lot of those gaps that were affecting my behaviour as a child, which ultimately was due to growing up in a very poor household, with a single-parent family, and a mother who needed to work.

**DR:** You grew up in East London, did you? Or?

**MX:** Yeah, and in Leytonstone, in East London. I mean, I can't describe how impoverished we were, but we were poor. So, my mum was either trying to study or working very low paid jobs, and I was kind of raised by my grandfather in the family home, her dad. He was a brilliant man and had lots of time – he was a working-class carpenter, and was fascinated by ballet, and opera, and classical music, and art, and I received a lot of that from him. But there was this need for attention, I think. And so I kind of 'acted out' – in school I would play up to receive attention, never being able to rationalise it like that. And at some point, I remember a teacher coming along, called Mrs Bellamy, and we did some drama classes, and I enjoyed it, and she kind of said I had a knack for it. And I thought: 'Great! It's just showing off, isn't it really, which is what I'd been doing to get attention in the first place!' And so that kind of morphed, I guess. And in secondary school then, I was in school plays, and also I think – as a mixed-raced kid with an absent Black father, or a come-and-go Black father, growing up in a white household, even though I was provided with resources – there was this need to kind of understand this bit of myself, again, that felt absent maybe. And for me, that came through Black politics, and it came through – you know, like Stephen Lawrence happened when I was ten, and I remember that being like a crystallising moment in my life – that I am perceived as a threat and therefore can quite quickly become



a victim because of hatred that is completely irrational. And I think, as we talk, you'll see that kind of speaks to lots of the work that I've then gone on to make, I think. So through that also I kind of discovered hip hop music and some friends in school – and again, this is all happening at like 14, 15, 16 years of age – and we formed a little rap group, you know, we started copying other people's rap lyrics, and then we start writing our own rap lyrics, and then, I start chopping up little bits of sound on software, and we're all just doing it ourselves ultimately. And at some point, I kind of think: 'I'm a rubbish rapper, but I'm quite a good DJ', so I'm like: 'I'm gonna stick with this bit of it'. And the other crucial thing is at some point I wandered down to my local theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East, which is again critical because of what it is, and what it was, in terms of being absolutely centred in its community, and its community being incredibly diverse and poor and working class. And being given a platform to express myself in that space, by that organisation, by the people who were there. The groups that were there were like The Posse, and The BiBi Crew, and the people who then went on to do *Goodness Gracious Me*, and *The Real McCoy*. So lots of Black and Asian talent – comedians, who would come from similar backgrounds to myself, being amazing!

### **[00:05:41] COMING TO RADIO**

**DR:** And this is late '90s? I would say, yeah?

**MX:** Yeah. So, this is like '96/'97. So, I'm living this dual life, I guess, where I'm in Stratford East Youth Theatre as a performer and an actor, and then I'm also DJing. At some point, I stumble onto pirate radio, and that's going quite well. And I said to my mum – in the summer holidays of sixth form college – I said: 'I'm not going to go back, I'm not enjoying it. I'm going to go and be a superstar DJ.' And she said: 'Alright, son, if you say so. You've got two years. And if that doesn't work then you must go back to college and continue your studies' – to become, I don't know, a drama facilitator, a drama teacher. I've done a little bit of acting, I've done some professional acting in a short film through Stratford East, directed by Armando Iannucci, and then found out this was his directorial debut. I had no idea who he was at the time, because I was like 16. I also auditioned for – in my words at the time, when I got home: 'Mum, I auditioned for a man, but he had like a woman's name.' And she said: 'Oh, do you mean Jude Law?' And I was like: 'Oh, that's, yeah, that's who I mean. Jude. Jude. I remembered his name was Jude!' I was so, like, I don't want to say uncultured, but inexperienced beyond Theatre Royal Stratford East, and my circle of hip hop artists. And then around the age of 18, lots happened very quickly: I got picked up by the BBC, they'd heard my pirate radio station, and they asked me to come and join them on this new station called 1Xtra that they were building. So I did that.

**DR:** What was your pirate station called? Is that important to the narrative?

**MX:** So it was called Juice FM, and it was in the basement of a hairdresser's on Goldhawk Road up in Shepherd's Bush. And I'd go there for two hours, and sometimes I'd get there and it'd be locked, and it had been raided, and the police had, you know, taken everything. So you'd be like: 'Okay, back to Leytonstone.'

**DR:** And how did the BBC pick it up? What was it that appealed to them about your radio?

**MX:** Yeah. So I think I was doing something quite unique in that I was kind of exclusively doing UK hip hop, British hip hop, rappers from all around the UK – this glorious spectrum of accent, you know, Scottish rappers, rappers from Newcastle, Liverpool, the Midlands. And I guess that was my thing. So, like, people who emerged from that – Roots Manuva, Estelle, Plan B, Professor Green later on, Skreïn, loads of people who – Example, who, you know, became a huge house music star. So again, lots of kind of embryonic little beginnings in this world, and these guys were coming on my show and I was interviewing them. And what I understand was that Wilbur Wilberforce, who also had founded Kiss FM, who was founding 1Xtra, would drive around in a car and pick up different radio stations and tune in and listen, and found me! And I got invited in to go and do a pilot, and I did that for, I think, five years. So that became kind of one track of life, and that involved, you know, travelling around Europe, clubs, festivals, Glastonbury, Big Chill – just a very different sort of life I would say, a life that kind of started at 11pm and finished at 6am. And then I also had, at the same time, Philip Hedley, the artistic director of Stratford East, asked me to join the board of Theatre Royal Stratford East. I said: 'I don't know what that means, but I'll do it!' So I sat on the board and I didn't say anything for three years, because I didn't



understand, really, what people were saying, this weird Arts Council language, kind of bureaucratic speech about budgets, and governance, and relationships with local authority, and Arts Council. Which of course now it's brilliant that I had this formative training, but it was all new again.

**DR:** How old were you when you sat on the board for Theatre Royal Stratford East?

**MX:** 18, first time.

**DR:** 18. That was quite a nice sort of decision from Philip to involve people who were of that generation.

**MX:** I think that speaks to the ethos of that building, absolutely! Again, I always say: 'I had a blood transfusion from Joan Littlewood at the age of 11.'

**DR:** Brilliant!

**MX:** That's how it feels.

**DR:** Yeah. So was DJ Excalibah born then, when you were running your Juice FM? Is that how that name came about?

**MX:** Yeah. Well, he started as MC Excalibah, when he was scribbling other people's lyrics, and that came off of – because I wanted to be an actor when I was 11, I decided my surname wasn't useful enough. So I changed my surname to 'Xia', which was from a Street Fighter character, called Chun-Li Zang, but I didn't know how to pronounce that surname, so I pronounced it 'Xiang', and lost the 'n' and the 'g'. Then I start writing this on all my school books, and some other kids were like: 'What's the Excalibur stuff you keep writing?' And I was like: 'Hey, it doesn't say Excalibur, but that's a good fit!' It was all so organic, you know, like there was no plan in any of this. And the other thing that Stratford then did is they invited me in to start like DJing under poetry nights, and variety nights, and things like that. I'm working with Jonzi D, who runs Breakin' Convention, exceptional theatre hip hop artist. I'm doing a show with him, and someone walks in, and this guy's name is ULTZ, U-L-T-Z. And I don't know him and he says: 'I'd like to talk to you about a project. Jay-Z's just sampled "It's the Hard Knock Life" from *Annie*. Do you think you could sample an entire musical?' And I say, like I always say: 'Yeah, sure!' And we end up doing a youth theatre version, where we sample and re-interpolate this musical called *The Boys from Syracuse* by Rodgers and Hart, and that becomes a hip hop piece that Phillip then says: 'We've got to put this on stage professionally!', and we do. And we strip out the seats in the auditorium, and we put crash barriers in, and security on the door, and we leave the doors open, so people can go to the bar, and we turn the auditorium into a club, and the whole thing is delivered out front through microphones, through the form of a hip hop concert, and all the dialogue happens off stage through huge monitors on the side. All based around – and, again, another Jay-Z influence, which was his Hard Knock Life tour – where we would see them do their show for each montage, and then immediately as they step off stage into the wings, there's a video camera in their face, and people going: 'How did it go, man? How'd you feel?' And they're like: 'Ah, it was great! Did he get the money off of–?' And they suddenly go into their own kind of personal politics. And we were like: 'That's the form that this show can have', and it had street dance in it... So again, like, that's what I knew theatre had to be, I didn't know Shakespeare, I didn't know Arthur Miller, those plays weren't put on stage at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. It was all new work by new Black, Asian voices about the stories that were happening around me. That, again, feels critical, like, crucial.

### **[00:12:19] REINVENTING MUSICAL THEATRE**

**DR:** Yeah. So *Da Boyz*, which was 2004 – you made this 'sampled musical' – you just described it in those terms, you know, you 'sampled' the musical. What does that mean, actually? You've told us what it looked like in the space, but dealing with the actual content of the text and music, how did you sample it?

**MX:** So of course there's the musical component. We know what sampling music is – we hear, you know, re-interpolated bits of one song, transformed beats and baselines put over them in a different way that creates a new song. That was part of what we would do, we would grab the songs in their entirety, find the bits we wanted, sometimes look at the score and replay elements of them... Sometimes if we just take that loop of a bassline, that can become the whole melody for our piece. And



then we kind of sampled the script as well, I guess – we would take a line of dialogue, and all character names stayed the same, but if dialogue didn't work for the modern time, we would adapt, change a word, change an adjective. And there was a bit about 'going to get a strap'. I mean, it's kind of horrendously misogynistic, someone going to get a strap to beat their wife when they get home, or something like that – must remember this is based on *The Comedy of Errors*. *The Boys from Syracuse* is like a cod-Romanesque style – you know, like togas and badly-painted columns – version of *The Comedy of Errors*. So, we had the Dromio, the Antipholus twins. We had all these characters in our work. But essentially, we tried to hold as much of the dialogue as possible. You know, they start with a little prologue, where they shouted: 'If it's good enough for Shakespeare, it's good enough for us.' And we thought: 'That is exactly what we're saying to this community of East Londoners. If it's good enough for Shakespeare, it's good enough for us. But this is how we will deliver it to you.' So I think that's what sampling means, you know.

**DR:** Great, great, great! Okay, it makes sense. And when you say 'we', who is the rest of the 'we'?

**MX:** Who is 'we'? So there's me as like musical adapter and onstage DJ, playing the show every night. There's my lyricist – I write some of the lyrics as well, but a guy called MC Scholar, who was in the original rap group that I was in. He then went on to join another rap group, called Dirty Diggers, who had like three albums on a label in Brighton, and now, he works in governmental advisory policy on outpatient care – so, you know, the shifts! And then, ULTZ, of course – now, ULTZ is like the visionary, he's the one, who was designing it. But I guess, what I love about ULTZ and where his radicalism sits, is he absolutely seeks authenticity by putting real people around him. You know, have real hip hop artists around you, if you're going to try and sample, if that's your medium of choice, I guess. And he always does that, you know. I remember, you know, when he's doing design for *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, and he calls me from the West Coast of Ireland, where he's measuring door frames in little cottages to make sure that they're exactly the same when he puts them on stage. So again this becomes part of my training about authenticity, and truth, and realness. I think they're the main three of us. When I then did *The Blacks* with ULTZ, we kind of in a way licensed songs out. So we were working with particular artists, and they would each look after their own material, or we'd write a framework for them and they'd then tweak it, so it felt more like Kyza, or Kat Francois or Tameka Empson, or whoever was doing it.

**[00:15:40 to 00:16:30] Excerpt from *Da Boyz* (2004)**

**DR:** So that was the big break, *Da Boyz*. Then, you did *The Blacks* – was *The Blacks* the next, the Jean Genet play? What did you do with that?

**MX:** So, ULTZ about two years later says: 'I'm working on this play', and he's working with a group of South African Black artists and I think Swedish white artists, both exploring Genet. And he's a Genet aficionado, you know, he kind of understands that man and his life to his core. And he says: 'There's this play called *The Blacks*, and I think that it's got passages within it that speak directly to the anger of American hip hop circa 1989.' You know, kind of Public Enemy, N.W.A, Dr Dre, the kind of anger and the 'tear-it-all-up-and-burn-it-all-down' radicalism of it, I guess. And that anger of course is directed at whiteness, as is a lot of the anger within hip hop. And so he says: 'I think we can do something and I'd love you to musically adapt it with me and I'd love you to co-direct it.' And I said: 'I don't know what that means, but I'll sit next to you while you direct it!' And he said: 'That's what it means.' So that became the job, you know. Again – I'm learning so much. I remember like telling someone: 'Try saying it like this', and him saying: 'Don't ever tell an actor how to say a line. You've got to help them find it within themselves.' And all of these kind of soft trainings that I was getting without even knowing that it was happening. So we did *The Blacks*. It's also known as a clown show, it has the royal family and various heads of institutions within the state, turning up in whiteface, and we went as real as we possibly could with the whiteface make-up. And then you realise at the end of it the whole thing's a big ruse, and actually, it's an entire group of Black performers, who are actually a political party, who are executing a leader upstairs so they can re-elect a new leader, but they need to keep the white populace held, whilst also reminding them again of the crimes against Black and against Blackness over 200 years. And for that there was no music, you know? So that kind of started from scratch, having to imagine what music would work with each piece, like the creation of a musical. It's probably worth saying that Stratford East ran – for a period of ten years I think – a New Musical Writing programme



that I did a number of times, and eventually, kind of graduated, and then was teaching on the course. It was about looking at the structure of the traditional musical, but going: 'Okay, but what if you're an electro producer? What if you're a hip hop DJ? How can you make musical theatre?' And I guess kicking the parameters and the confines slightly wider than they may appear at first sight.

**DR:** Did you have any musical training, when you were growing up? No?

**MX:** No, none whatsoever. Like I always say, completely untrained. But again, like my grandfather – so, again, to go back to him – he learned to paint, and he learned to paint by watching Bob Ross videos, you know, like the guy with the big afro. And he would do incredible paintings. So I just always had this idea that if you wanted to learn something, you just learnt it; you just studied it yourself. So now I still play rudimentarily, you know, it's not great, my playing on the piano, or the guitar, but I use electronic equipment to be able to cheat, and loop, and work in small segments, where I can do detail, and then, come back out, and look at the bigger picture.

**DR:** So this musical theatre course at Theatre Royal Stratford East, it was like a programme that was designed to involve young people into the process of making musical theatre – in the vein of traditional musical theatre, or to experiment in some way?

**MX:** I don't think it was just young people, I think it was artists who maybe didn't consider that theatre was an avenue for them, or that musical theatre was an avenue for them. It was run by Fred Carl and Robert Lee, who were professors at the Tisch School of Arts in New York. They would come over – two months, ten writers, ten musicians of various disciplines, you'd go and see shows... You know, I remember falling asleep in the front row of *Cabaret*, like aged 18 – and now I love *Cabaret*, but as an 18-year-old working-class kid in the East End of London, I was like kind of looking at it through a lens, and not understanding what was for me in it. It was a very clear process, it was: 'Write a song for a character.' That was the first thing that everybody could do, because it was what they were already doing – so you think about the character in this scenario, and you write a song for them. The next thing was a scene into song, and then you'd look at a duologue or a duet. You'd look at the 'want' song. So all of these things that are the building blocks of musical theatre, that become tools, I guess. And out of that some lovely little collaborations happened. You know, I met someone, called Ian MacGregor, who works for the New London Orchestra. So then he said to me, when he saw *The Blacks*, you know, six years later: 'Oh, I loved your remix of 'Dies Irae!' – Mozart's 'Dies Irae', which I'd stripped out and replayed and put all the beats and drums in – 'We want to write a new urban musical for an orchestra, do you want to do it?' So of course, what do I say? I said: 'Yeah, of course I'll write a musical for an orchestra!' And then I go: 'Oh shit, I can't read music, I can't write music!' But again, I use software again, massive learning curve of like – I remember handing over the score for the musical director to kind of check through for me, and he said: 'You've got things played on the cello that can't be played on the cello. It doesn't go that high, Matthew. At that point, it's handed over to the violin. That's–' And I suddenly go: 'Oh, of course, the size of the instrument, the resonance of the sound, the depth–' All of these things that I had no knowledge or training of. Baptism of fire after baptism of fire! [*Laughter.*]

**DR:** That's great! I think what's quite interesting in terms of what you're talking about how you are kind of altering musical theatre, that might be interesting for us to explore a bit more, is this role of software and technology, and so on. As part of this project, I was also talking to Conrad Murray, you know, from the Beatbox Academy, and he was telling us about how when he was starting, he was using all the sort of decks, you know, the cassette decks and so on. And what was the kind of technology that has been part of your process of music theatre-making, music-making, and so on?

**MX:** Yeah, it's hip hop technology essentially. So, you know, if you look at the very start, we knew that hip hop was made from samples. And we had this bit of software that was called GoldWave, I guess the closest thing is Audacity. It's a single line of audio, you can't layer anything up. So we'd take a single hi-hat, copy-paste, copy-paste, copy-paste. Now, we've got four hi-hats. Okay, copy a snare from another file, and copy that onto the third hi-hat. Now, loop that up, and loop it up again. And so, we're doing hip hop, essentially, but in the most, again, basic way. But what I love about hip hop is that it was, again, it was a means to an end, you know? It's people looping up a section of a song that they see in the club, makes people dance more. And first of all, they're doing it badly, and it's not done on time, it's just – here's that loop, okay, a bit of a pause; now there it is again, a bit of a pause. And slowly,



we can have a cross fader, so it's seamless, and you can beat-juggle. And now, we've got four loops of four fours. So that's what I've always worked with. And, you know, I'm looking over it right now, the MPC – the MPC2000XL I used to use, which is a classic bit of hip hop kit. This is like a machine micro, which is a modern bit of I guess sampling software, and looping equipment, but it now all speaks to the computer, so the computer allows you to do much more with it. Cubase was crucial – so when I was writing for the orchestra, I'm banging out notes on a MIDI keyboard and then when I hit 'Print', it prints a score. It's kind of bizarre, right? I'd say it's like me writing a book in Arabic that I can neither read, nor write, but I just do it all in English, but it comes out in perfect Arabic, and I don't know how it happens. That's, you know – the software is translating, or making up for my lack of knowledge or skills, I guess.

**DR:** I want to ask you a bit more about ULTZ, your collaborator. I don't know his work – what is his background? Because he seems to be such an important influence, I just want to understand. You had the transfusion from Joan Littlewood, you had a kind of like your hip hop and DJing experience, and what about ULTZ, who was your key collaborator in terms of starting off your theatre career?

**MX:** Yeah. So ULTZ is like a twisted genius. He's considerably older than me – like, I think now he's in his 70s, and we met 20 years ago or thereabouts. He's an opera designer, he's an opera director, he does things at scale. He's very conceptual. The base concept of a piece of work is the stuff that he will drill down into quite a lot, and then that will make sure that it manifests like that. I kind of want to say you absolutely know his work – his Olivier Award-winning designer of *Jerusalem*, that's ULTZ, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, most of Richard Jones' work is designed by ULTZ. So, you think of those kind of big design interventions that he delivers – Joe Hill-Gibbins, he works with a lot as well. I think what he offers me is just years of experience of working. And he's kind of not precious, I think he's sensitive around his work, but he's not precious, which means we can have really honest conversations. And what I love about him is more than anything he's become a dear and trusted friend. You know, I met him when I was 16 years old and–

**DR:** And he was hanging around Theatre Royal Stratford East as well?

**MX:** Yeah. So, I understand that him and Jenny Tiramani, who's another brilliant designer who I've worked with a number of times on pantomimes, and then when I did *Into The Woods* at the Royal Exchange, I worked with Jenny – they were like, almost the in-house designers at Stratford East. They worked with Joan Littlewood. I believe Jenny was in charge of like the colours – so when you go into the auditorium, which particular red, which particular gold, which particular white, how much of it, where it goes. All of that stuff. They were part of all of that stuff that was going on, and their relationship with Philip Hedley. So, for me, you know, they're in that generation of makers and thinkers and doers.

**DR:** So you never had to go back to college like your mum said – you found these mentors, and found ways of defining your own artistic identity by doing it. We heard about *Da Boyz*, and we heard about *The Blacks*. Basically, from then on, it seems like there're quite a number of musicals that you did from then on, but also, quite a number of plays as in: *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* there, and also, *Blue/Orange*, but at the same time, you've kind of got *Into The Woods* by Stephen Sondheim, and it's inter-spiced with each other. Like, a bit of plays, a bit of musicals, and so on. So how did that journey go for you?

**MX:** I just feel like it's the natural evolution of all the bits of me that were already, you know, slightly freewheeling. At some point I stepped down from the board of Stratford East, because a position for associate director had come up, I did that. And did some operas, and some musicals, and some pantomimes, and really got an understanding of working in that form – and then felt like I needed to test myself. And like, I wasn't making any shows by myself at this point, and I didn't think I was going to get to it at Stratford East. So I left and I discovered middle class white theatre, and it kind of petrified me. And I tried to assimilate, and I started talking differently, and dressing differently, and behaving differently, and walking differently. But within that, I found kind of little safe spaces: so the Young Vic was one of those places. I found a relationship with David Lan, who I assisted on a show called *Blackta* – so, again, you know, like the thematic are staying the same I think. And then I become aware, through the Genesis network, of the RTYDS [Regional Theatre Young Directors Scheme], and I apply for that. And then move up to Liverpool, where I do a play called *Scrappers*, where I introduced some politics, because on paper it's like an all-white cast. And I go: 'There's no reason for it to be that.' And so I bring Joan with me up to Liverpool, [*laughter*] and we insist that it's for the community, and the



community has to be reflected on stage. And that play is about a kind of small working-class community that's being affected by, you know, local government and development, and things like that. So again class issues are thematically-consistent. And then this job comes up in Manchester, and I go for it, and it's Associate Artistic Director. And I know that somehow I want to be an Artistic Director, because I want to do what Philip Hedley did for me and did for Stratford, and I want to do that thing. And so, Sarah [Frankcom]'s there, and Sarah's running it, and Sarah's brilliant. And she says: 'You should push yourself, you know! You should be outside your comfort zone. It's a 700-seat auditorium in the round. I think you should do a musical – these are the ones on paper.' We look at them, and at this point, I have a one-year-old child, and I'm listening to certain songs in the car on the drive and I'm crying. And I'm like: 'What is this? What's going on?' So, again, like, politics – you know, my life changes, my politics shift, I develop a new realm of politics, which are about the rights of children, and how children are affected by the behaviour of adults. And then that starts to make me think back to – again, it's all the same stuff for me. And I pull in people from Stratford East. So, Jenny Tiramani comes and John Leonard, who was the only sound designer I kind of knew, really, at that time, comes and works on the show; and Sean Green, who was the musical director on the opera. So it's all the same networks for me. And I do a massive musical! But again, to carry that thread of thematics, I go: 'We all know it's about fairy tale and folktale, great, take that as a given. What's it really about? Cool, it's about Manchester, here, now. It's about this community, our society.' And so I think when you look at the pictures of it, you know, it's meant to look like Alderley Edge or somewhere in the outskirts of Manchester with a community of people from now, ever so slightly falling into fairy tale tropes, but existing, because theatre must be about the here and now – or so the blood that courses through my body tells me! Also, in a way, because of what happened in 2012, right, because of connections from Stratford East, Jenny Sealey invites me to DJ at the Paralympic Opening Ceremony. And I'm not really doing radio anymore, and I'm getting slightly annoyed by being out of the house at two o'clock in the morning, and I do this almighty gig in front of 85,000 people, with my mum, a tiny little speck somewhere in the crowd. And I feel incredibly proud, it's my 30th birthday, and I'm in Stratford, and I'm like: 'Stop DJing! Just stop.' So I kind of did. So, then, I'm looking I guess for ways to bring music back into the world of theatre that I'm making. But that's now so much broader than just hip hop, I guess.

**[00:31:34 to 00:33:44] Excerpt from *The Blacks* (2007)**

### **[00:33:45] HOLDING THE SPACE FOR TRANSFORMATION**

**DR:** How do you think of yourself as a director? What do you feel is your main function in the room when you're making work with other people?

**MX:** When I'm making work with other people, I think I'm like a head facilitator or director of collaboration, because it is a collaborative art form. If I'm the initiator of a project, then I might have some clues, and some ideas, and some pathways, and possibly even know bits about the destination, but I never go in – I don't see myself as an auteur, as a visionary who kind of imagines a thing, and then delivers the thing. I have soft ideas and we play with them, and I throw them up against other people, and then they throw them back at me, reconfigured, and I go: 'Oh, that's interesting!' I hear many, many voices in my head, like Peter Brook saying: 'You know, your role is to sit there, and work out why it's boring, and when it's boring fix it.' [*Laughter.*] Things like that. I know that we're here to entertain – I imagine my mum, I imagine my mum quite a lot in my work. As a working-class woman, who doesn't go to the theatre lots, and doesn't know all the tricks, and tools, and methods, and therefore, whatever we're using, and applying, needs to be accessible in every single way. And again, I think that's my role in the space. There's a tiny bit of pretentiousness I'm going to add to that, which is: Bill Brewster, who's kind of a music historian and wrote a book called *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, talks about the role of the DJ. And I think this came out of me trying to solve the bits of me, like, to mesh them together in a way that really made them more easily digestible for people, who were looking at my CV, and asking me stupid questions, and saying offensive things, like: 'Your CV is very schizophrenic, Matthew.' And I go: 'That's offensive for so many reasons. Not least, the improper use of the phrase schizophrenia!' But it's not, it's all me trying to work out what I am. And Bill Brewster in his book talks about the shaman. He talks about, you know, the griot, the shaman, the person who holds the space for transformation, for ritual, for mass engagement, for spectacle. And my job, I think,



within that – and this is why it's not different whether I'm in a club or on the radio or creating a piece of theatre – is to shape the energy for an audience across a particular amount of time. Now, I'm kind of fascinated by, like, you know the liveness of that. When I'm in a club – particularly back in the day before we had Serato, where we could have all the songs in the entire universe ever made by every species, downloadable immediately, but when we used to have to like pack a bag, and now I'm going: 'How am I reading the room? I'm going to go here, or no, that didn't – okay, let's pull back – I've lost these guys over here.' And feeling that energy shift and move, you know, knowing there was a DJ who had the headline slot after me, so how do I gear up towards that? And now what I get to do is: I get to do that, but I get to do it with 15 other people examining every single second of time within an allotted amount of performance; and then, to deliver it, and test it, and try with an audience. And I think this is why my forums are always live. So it's interesting the way this Shlomo project has come around that, actually, you know, that began as a live project, but because of circumstances has shifted into something not live and digital.

### [00:37:16] COLLABORATION WITH SK SHLOMO

**DR:** Yes, indeed. I mean, that's something that I really wanted to talk to both of you about. I talked to Shlo, and interviewed him as part of this before what was going to be our week together at Battersea Arts Centre. He talked also about the way in which he works that is very much about taking in the feedback from the audience, and building it into the show, and kind of like keeping this loop going, if you like, as part of his development process of the work. And in this case, obviously, making this version of the piece for TV has, in a way, placed a different framework on your process, for both of you. How was that for you?

**MX:** Again, another baptism of fire: 'Should we do it as a TV project?' 'Yes, let's do as a TV project.' I think it was interesting in that Shlo came to me, and again, of course I know Shlo, because we've been sat on tour buses together, going around the country, doing gigs in 2004.

**DR:** Yeah, yeah! Tell us more about that, let's do that bit of the story. How did you first meet?

**MX:** So I think when he was in Foreign Beggars, they were affiliated with a group called Underground Alliance. I'm looking for the record here. From Foreign Beggars, it says: 'Excalibah, you're the saviour of UK hip hop.' [*Laughter.*] So, you know, like, we were all in the same clubs, in the same rooms, and I'd met him through Foreign Beggars. I think I was the first DJ to play them on the radio nationally, so we developed an affinity, and that was it. And then I knew over a period of time that he was developing little kind of bits of hip hop theatre at the same time as I was doing things like *Da Boyz*. So, actually, we must have met much earlier, like, we must have done. But I knew that he'd done a couple shows. And then he said: 'I want to work with a director.' And I think it just made sense that we worked with each other, because I could be sensitive to his lack of experience as an actor but his incredible experience as a performer, and know how to work with that, because it was stuff that we'd done with *The Blacks*, you know, working with poets and comedians, and rappers to deliver a true performance with them. So it all just felt very natural, I think.

**DR:** And this was supposed to be – you were supposed to be doing a show together, which was going to be going to Edinburgh this year [2020], and you did a little bit of a work-in-progress at Battersea Arts Centre together in January, at which point – maybe you can tell us what happened at that point in terms of the development of the idea, and then, we can move on to the next stage?

**MX:** Yeah. So for me that was kind of, you know, 'post-it notes on the wall' stage in a shape that tells you about the arc of the story, but also that started by just talking to Shlo about what material he had ready. I guess it'd been a kind of R&D, and then story development is essentially what that was – drilling down into, as I always want to, the kind of the 'why'. 'Why are you telling the story? Why do we care? Why should they care? What do you hope to achieve by the end of it?' I guess dramaturgy ultimately, you know, the meaning-making process. And helping him with that. Then, he went away and wrote a first draft. And then... Covid! [*Laughter.*] And that first draft, you know, we were doing further script development, and we started doing script development remotely – it all feels so long ago, like in week one, when the house party was a thing!



### **[00:40:30] INNOVATION ON EVERY FRONT**

**MX:** And then, this came out of it, which was: there's an opportunity to do it as a 15-minute thing. So then, you know, that becomes kind of editorial question – what would we want to hold onto?

**DR:** Fifteen-minute thing for the BBC *Culture in Quarantine* series, right? And then you had to rethink what that 15 minutes would be as part of that?

**MX:** Yeah, and also, you know, form, like – we all desperately wanted to hold on to the live experience of it. And this live raving experience that people all across the country, at the same time, turn off their lives, get their glow sticks and rave together – felt epic, and it felt like some of the stuff he'd been doing already with his *Homeskool Beatbox Adventures*, which of course I'd helped him put together – I'm not sure it can have 'dramaturgy' – but in an ideas and ordering and structure kind of narrative and storytelling I guess.

**DR:** Yes.

**MX:** So that was it. And so, then we worked on getting the script down to 15 minutes, we worked out what team we now needed, which felt like a very different team to the one we were looking at before. And I've kind of wanted to lean into TV and film so this is for me a really useful opportunity – baptism of fire. But again, what was great is I had wonderful people. So, we worked with Chris Britten, who's an experienced film-maker, who's worked with Shlo on other short pieces, but hasn't, you know, hasn't done so much drama, maybe. So again I come in and I direct, again, the piece – we co-direct the piece. He directs the camera, I direct the performance, but we can all have a say on everything because it's, you know, a bunch of guys in a room, trying to work out what to do.

**DR:** Yeah, yeah. And you had to sort of like audition people online, and have like a Zoom rave, right, that you had to make happen in this process?

**MX:** Yeah, directing the crowd scene – directing the crowd scene, whilst sat in a chair, looking at a computer screen! [*Laughter.*]

**DR:** Yeah! How was that? That's kind of an innovation on every front – I mean, not many people have had to do that.

**MX:** No, I agree. It's looking well, it's looking good, it was fun. What you realise is, it really was like a crowd scene, you know, it didn't need much: 'This is beat one, everybody. Then, when Shlo says this, we all do this. And when Shlo says this, we all do this. And then we just rave. Great! Okay. Can we go again? And when we rave, really rave!'

**DR:** Yeah.

### **[00:42:50 to 00:44:39] The rave scene from *Reconnect: Digital Raving (2020)***

**MX:** But also, the set up of again technology of them all recording on QuickTime, but performing into Zoom, because QuickTime records at a higher frame rate, you get a better definition–

**DR:** I see...

**MX:** Uploading that, and then, Chris having to, through software, create a kind of a fake Zoom screen that we can time things a little better in, and have people arrive and leave when we want them to–

**DR:** I see, how interesting! That really is interesting.

**MX:** Yeah, again, like not my skillset, and I'm not even gonna say: 'Yes, I can do that!' [*Laughter.*]

**DR:** What's the next stage? Will there be a stage, when you return to the actual live, you know, envisaging the live performance?

**MX:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that's the dream, isn't it? This is like a – I don't know what is it? Like a little bonus, a little – a trailer for the live experience in a slightly different version. And live experience is an hour long, it allows us to go much deeper, we meet characters from his life and they stay with us throughout the piece.

**DR:** And yeah, you had a couple of other performers, who were with you on set. So, Testament and Monique.



**MX:** Yeah. So they were old friends that he'd lost touch with. In this kind of idea of reconnecting, they got in touch with him and compelled him to, I guess, to get through any barriers that he was feeling. Again you know, I think it's interesting that Testament is not a not an actor. Again, he's a performer. But I've worked with Testament loads as well, and helping him develop, and move from that space of being a hip hop artist to a hip hop artist making hip hop theatre to a theatre artist with a hip hop background.

### **[00:46:20] ART AS ACTIVISM**

**DR:** What else is on the cards for you? I mean, what else are you working on, hoping to work on? I know these are extraordinary circumstances right now, but in an ideal world.

**MX:** Well, with the company that I run, Actors Touring Company, which is where I guess, you know, the majority of my work now happens, there are a number of projects. Some of them are – I guess, knowing what we all know now, they'll will make a bit more sense. One of them is a straight play by an American playwright about a group of working-class factory workers in an economic crisis. Another one starts as a kind of minstrel show, becomes a hip hop concert, ends as a piece of Afro-futurism.

**DR:** Wow! What's that called? Does it have a title yet?

**MX:** Yeah, it's got a title. I'm scared to talk about it too widely – but you know, everyone does know about it, because it was the runner up in the Bruntwood International Prize last year. And it's called *Tambo & Bones*, and it is phenomenal – it's kind of Black Lives Matter, but on acid, you know, it's incredible, and so pertinent!

**DR:** Are you directing it or – are you directing all of the ATC shows?

**MX:** Yeah, the funding just means that's how it has to work, I think. It's a show I'm talking to people about at all times, and as soon as we're allowed to move again, you know, we'll see if we can get that in motion. There's a book of poetry that I want to see if it's possible to turn into an experience. Not theatre, but an experience I think might be the best way of describing it, with music, and maybe food. And then, I get to commission now! That's fun, isn't it? I said a year ago, we were only going to commission women of colour for the first three years of my time at ATC. So we have Nessah Muthy writing a piece about online far right radicalisation and the confluence with loneliness in young boys. We have Yasmin Joseph writing a piece, and I'm talking to Mojisola Adebayo as well about writing something.

**DR:** Great!

**MX:** And again, like, music is just in and around. I'm never thinking anymore: 'I'm a hip hop theatre artist'. I think that I'm just a theatre-maker who used to DJ and who can make music, and they all inform each other, I guess.

**DR:** Great! There is also maybe something else to talk about that you've in a way mentioned, but not quite explicitly yet, and that's your activism as well. You were a founding member of Act For Change. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that, what that is, and any other work on that sort of front that you've been doing?

**MX:** Yeah well, I guess – you're right, we have spoken about all of it in a way, haven't we? But we've just not named it. So I think my art is activism. They – again, they are all me, the shaman that I am, is a political shaman, and the space that he's going to create is a political space.

**DR:** I think we've just got a title for our interview: 'The Political Shaman'. Excellent! Thank you!

**MX:** 'The Political Shaman' – Super! I've never even said that before. That's good, I like that! That'll be on the business cards. So, it's all underpinned by the same stuff; and it's all underpinned by ULTZ and it's underpinned by Joan Littlewood and it's underpinned by my Blackness and my poorness and my working-class roots, and going into a space which was wonderful and then leaving that space, and meeting the world, and the world didn't look like Theatre Royal Stratford East. And then I started to become aware of, you know, the institutional racism, and the glass ceilings that are in place, and the power that is controlled, and the power dynamics, and the structural hierarchies that keep certain people out. And I say 'no!', and I will continue to say 'no', and I will say 'no' in as many ways as possible



– be that getting with other like-minded individuals and trying to form a body – which is Act for Change, which is a lobbying group for better representation on/off stage, in front of and behind screen. You know, the boards that I sit on – Artistic Directors of the Future is about changing senior leadership within organisations, putting people into board-shadowing positions, so they have more understanding of the mechanics of how this all works, so that when they do it they're more empowered. David Lan said to me years ago, when I was pulling back from speaking out loudly about something, and I think like *Evening Standard* were on the phone, and they said: 'What do you say? What are your opinions on this matter?' And I said: 'Call me back in ten minutes.' – 'David, David, David, what do I say?' [Laughter.] And David said: 'Well, what do you think, Matthew?' And I told him what I think, and then, he said: 'Well, that's what you should say.' And I was like: 'Of course, of course! Stand by your principles, have principles.' The principles in the work are the principles that I want to see in the world, and I feel like I can affect them, at least within the sector. And so in the company, you know, I can lead by example, and all these little things that I can try and do to effect change. And right now, Duška, I guess, I'm like – I'm angry. And so, I'm speaking more bluntly in a lot of spaces and in a more unguarded fashion, and I'm quite openly just displaying trauma that may have occurred in an institution, because of a moment that happened or occurred. And it feels like the time's right for that. It feels like people are listening in a slightly different way, I guess, as well. I said to someone earlier like: 'Covid plus George Floyd and Extinction Rebellion is like the world has been grounded.' We've all been sent to our rooms, and it's like: 'You've been racist, and you've messed up the planet! Now go think about what you've done!' And so we're all going to think about it, and hopefully, when we come out, there'll be some difference. I really hope.

**DR:** I hope so too. Thank you so much!

**MX:** Absolute pleasure talking to you!

**DR:** Thank you!

Transcribed by Kalina Petrova

### Clips Summary

[00:15:40 to 00:16:30] *Da Boyz* (2004)

[00:31:34 to 00:33:44] *The Blacks* (2007)

[00:42:50 to 00:44:39] *Reconnect: Digital Raving* (2020)

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