

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Hi, and welcome to The Groundswell Festival at Nightwood Theater. I'm Donna-Michelle St. Bernard. I present as biracial black and female. I have short curly hair, mostly constrained to an adorable gray hat today. And I'm wearing a collared black short sleeve shirt. I'm in a room with the white backdrop, with all sorts of notes all over the place. Hit me up if you're curious. I am describing myself for the benefit of our blind and vision impaired audience members. And we do this with thanks to the council of accessibility and disability consultants, Jess Watkin and Shea [Ehrlich 00:00:42]. And other artists throughout the festival will also be describing themselves as they come up.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Although we have engaged many artists from across the country, Nightwood resides on Dish With One Spoon territory. We want to acknowledge and thank the traditional keepers of this land, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe, the Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the credit, and to acknowledge the past present and future presence of this land's many first nations, Metis and Inuit people, recorded and unrecorded. In these most challenging times, we promise to listen and translate our gratitude for your stewardship of this land into action. And now into action. Today, I'm going to be having a conversation with the beautiful Bilal Baig. Bilal.

Bilal Baig:

Hello. I am Bilal. I identify as a queer trans feminine Muslim person. Got brown skin, black wavy-ish hair today. And I recently got shorter bangs and I'm wearing a dark reddish purple lipstick and a pink top. And I'm in an Airbnb type apartment. So it's kind of standard white walls and there's a small kitchen to the left of me and a tall mirror to the right.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

That mirror, what a blessing.

Bilal Baig:

I know.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

So once you're done enjoying this conversation, we invite you to scroll down and check out the rest of the festival, which is up and down on this page that you're on now. Now that the festival has gone online, I have to say that the silver lining is the ability for each of us to curate our own relaxed performance in the way that best helps us to receive what we're watching. So we invite you to dim or brighten your lights as you like, to lower or pump up the volume as you like, to seat yourself comfortably, to have some water at hand. I'm always on that water trip. Do whatever feels best for you. And thank you so much for joining us.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Bilal. Okay. You know I like to spring from a place of strength because we're so powerful. So I wanted to ask you to start off by talking a little bit about a piece of work you've created and the creation of which you felt confident.

Bilal Baig:

My go-to response is a thing I actually worked on earlier this year that preceded the pandemic. And I think part of where the confidence came from was it was a program that I had run last year as well through the Amy Project called The Trans Gems. It's just such a lovely experience bringing, last year there were six trans women and trans fem peeps of color who came in and just kind of did essentially whatever they wanted and also weren't super trained actors or some were and some weren't, and some just wanted food and some money and to try writing and hanging out with other trans girls.

Bilal Baig:

The first year I ran it, which was in 2019, I was a mess the entire time and kept thinking that I was retraumatizing people or fucking them up or just not ... I was just so nervous because I just didn't want to fuck it up because the people, I cared so much about them and their life experiences.

Bilal Baig:

Then this year, 2020, I just felt like I was so in my element. I pushed the girls. They would sass me back and I would sass them right back and be like, "No, do it. I want you to at least try. Do your piece, but move really slowly with it." And these girls don't care about movement. Well, not all of them. And so anyways, I just reflect on that experience so fondly, because the group of six girls who did the program last year all came back again this year and there was way more money and really good food. I to this day continue to feel the deep connection I have with, actually, all six of them.

Bilal Baig:

And yeah, when I think about confidence and certainty, there was just the way I felt like I facilitated that space just was so different from the year before. And I really wanted to make space for them and what they wanted to do, but because we had run the program last year, I knew what their strengths were and then I kind of wanted to push them into different territories. One girl did a stand up piece last year and I was like, "That was great. You know you were great at that. But now I want you to write a dialogue between yourself and a different person, like an actual scene. Try it." Anyways, whatever.

Bilal Baig:

So that felt great and strong.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

And it sounds like you're comfortable in the role of provocateur, if that makes sense.

Bilal Baig:

Yes. There was just this moment where one of the girls, she's such a poet, gorgeous writing about flowers and nature and trans girls and blossoming. She didn't really do that last year, but I know that that's in her wheelhouse and she wanted to write a poem for this piece this year. And I said, "Okay, you know what? Yes, but you can never say the word flower. You can never say the word tree." And she ended up just writing about burgers and dicks and it was just relaxed and messy-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Classic combo.

Bilal Baig:

You know? Yeah. I felt like, yes, I wanted to provoke her to maybe find another way into her own organic poetic style and one could argue that the poem about dicks and burgers was just as beautiful and profound as some of her other writing.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I'm literally prepared to argue that without hearing it.

Bilal Baig:

Okay.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I'm with you.

Bilal Baig:

Okay. Good.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

There's nothing inherently unprofound about dicks and burgers.

Bilal Baig:

Yes.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. So something that I sort of picked up on earlier is the idea of stepping into confidence, like stepping up, with or without the confidence, moving through and stepping into one's confidence, just that sort of, "I know what I'm doing" thing. And I find it a really interesting space to be and a space that I find myself perpetually, rediscovering that I know how to do my job or rediscovering that there's something that I'm capable of and then periodically forgetting and recalling. I'm wondering about what is the piece that you can hold onto of the confidence that moves you through the next valley? Or how do you hold onto things that you're sure of when you move into a space that is less sure?

Bilal Baig:

Yeah. I mean, I don't know if ... Okay. For you, do you find that it's a thing internally that you've been able to hold onto, or do you kind of rely on certain external factors that help kind of support or maintaining your kind of knowingness of what you're doing next?

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah, I think mine's a bit of both. My mom has a nice piece of advice that she gives me casually. Sometimes I'm like, "Ugh, do I even do anything?" And she goes, "Oh, I need an updated copy of your resume. Can you just add whatever's new to it and send me a copy?" And I'm like, "Oh, you tricky little devil." And then I have to sit there and write down everything that I've done. And then I have to go, "Oh, sure wasting time wondering." If I wonder if I'm doing anything, let me go do more stuff first of all, thing one. I wasted a day making a list, but my resume's up to date, so it's all good. It's all good. Mommy's always right.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

So yeah, sometimes it is that external thing, but also then you must know that sometimes you're like, "Throw away these pens. I'll never write again. Oh, wait, a poem. Wait, wait. It just slammed into my brain."

Bilal Baig:

Right. I think then the best answer for me is I've always felt I have a really acute ability to listen. And I've felt that as a little kid and growing up, and I think it's why in some ways my friendships and relationships are the way they are where often it's a lot of space holding and really great ways that I love to do anyways. Anyway. Yeah. So I think that because my writing to me is just kind of another way to listen and then do something with it and facilitating is like that, and running workshops is about listening to the vibe of the room. That is a thing that doesn't shake for me anymore. Yes, my thoughts about myself and confidence and ability, all those things, I think maybe forever I'll continue to question or worry about or whatever. But I don't know. I feel like I'm a good listener, so I think that's not going to change. I hope.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. I love a good anchor. Like here's what I know about me.

Bilal Baig:

It feels like it's in. I was wired this way. I came into the world, I think, being a good listener. It wasn't really taught to me. No one in my family is necessarily a good listener. I think it's just something about the way the alchemy of it all worked. But I just remember being young, really young, and quiet and super observant and listening while everybody else seemed to be talking.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I'm wondering about, as you mentioned your family, it makes me think about conversations we had early on when you started with Right From The Hip about who you wanted to speak for and about and from. And I would love to hear you talk about sort of where you're sitting with that now you've had a pretty big year. [crosstalk 00:12:24].

Bilal Baig:

Sorry. What was the last part?

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Creation wise you've had a really big year.

Bilal Baig:

Yes, yes. So just quite recently, my mom has been dealing with some health stuff lately, and it's kind of been the story these past couple years, but I think she's just getting older and she's not really taking care of herself. And we're all kind of orbiting around her state of health and mind state as well. And so it's becoming clearer and clearer to me that I need to pump out a piece soon that she's going to be able to really access and feel comfortable accessing. And I think it also is no longer the piece that I started writing with, through with you and Right From The Hip, because I think it's got to be something that's entirely [inaudible 00:13:24], and whether that's just a 15 minute kind of video thing or something

longer, I do think that she has the capacity to really sit through something if she's got full control over understanding everything that's going on.

Bilal Baig:

And so, I don't know, I've talked about making lists and adding things to it, but now I think it's really important for me in the next year or two that I can really spend some time thinking about creating something that's entirely in [inaudible 00:13:59]. And it happens in this part of the world because she's here and her girlfriends are here. And maybe they're the only people who come and see the fucking show, but it just feels like that's become clear now and that's kind of now one part of my brain is like, "Okay, there's that."

Bilal Baig:

And the freeing thing is that the rest of my brain is allowed to kind of make whatever piece I want for whatever other community. But part of the conversation you and I had, DM, was around I just still to this day strongly feel like that's the work I'm creating for queer and trans [inaudible 00:14:42] people and others just, at this point, can't really coincide with the work that my mother and her friends would be able to consume, I guess, politics wise or belief system wise. So yeah, that is constantly still a negotiation. And I feel good about it. I'm good to be like, "Hey, if I write something and my mom needs to believe that her cis child, straight brown kid wrote that for her, cool." And then, yeah. Does that answer your question or did I-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

It does.

Bilal Baig:

Yeah? Okay.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. I'll come. If only two people come, I'll come as well to the show. And I'll do my best to understand what's being said.

Bilal Baig:

Yes.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Here in the 15 minute [inaudible 00:15:50] piece. Yeah. It's interesting. That shift is something that I think has been part of our conversation ongoing about you being particularly aware of who you want a piece to be for and going really hard in that direction. I'm thinking about my first reading of your piece for Lemon Trees event anthology. Yeah. Very shocking. And I remember that probably one of the first responses I ever had to art was in a classroom at Humber just said, "Oh my. That's terribly shocking." I wished I hadn't said it, but it was so true. Oh my goodness. Do you remember that?

Bilal Baig:

I do. I do. And I specifically-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Was that so awful?

Bilal Baig:

No, no. Well, because I think at that point, I at least encountered you in some other capacity before, or at least I had known that you sometimes say things that I should be taken off guard by, or like an adult teacher maybe wouldn't say some of the things that you say. And so-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

That sounds so accurate.

Bilal Baig:

Right. And so I knew that, but also it's you saying that something is shocking is a real form of a very high compliment, so I think that-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I'm so glad that you took it that way because it's haunted me.

Bilal Baig:

No, no, no. To be real at Humber, I was shocked that you were shocked because I didn't think it was that shocking. But then the Lemon Tree piece, when you emailed me about your response to it, that I thought that was really great. I was like, "Oh, this is awesome that I've shocked you with the content." Or perhaps it was the sexual nature specifically of that piece.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

It's usually that.

Bilal Baig:

Yes.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:18:04]

Bilal Baig:

Sexual nature specifically of that piece.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

It's usually that.

Bilal Baig:

Yes.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

No, but also the form of it is audacious. I don't know what's going on and I don't mind not knowing that. I also enjoy that aspect of the piece. Yeah, the intentional unsettling. That is, I guess, a thing that I generally tend to enjoy in theater, specifically in theater by folks from marginalized communities and something that really became very prominent with your summer work show.

Bilal Baig:

Yeah, yeah. [crosstalk 00:18:42].

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

It's the amount of discomfort that can be created by centering your lens. Yeah. I wonder if that has had any impact on how you look at, I guess, you talked a little bit earlier about it not being likely that a work that you create for your community, your chosen community, is going to be the one that resonates with your family, but it seems like you are still very persistent about that happening with general audiences or about not making it too easy for general audiences to come into the world that you're making.

Bilal Baig:

Totally. Yeah, yeah. Look, if I had the choice, if I could structure who got to... Not that I would want to, because that sounds super problematic, but if I got to structure who existed in a space, I would love for the work to be consumed predominantly if not only by queer and trans people, because I have to believe, as you're describing your experience, that that work pushes them to and makes them uncomfortable sometimes. It just so happens that we're living in a world where, in this specific city, the folks who come to theater are from predominantly a certain kind of life experience, and so, yes, if it... It's like, yes, they will come or they won't come, cool. I think it's probably why... The whole infrastructure, ticket sale side of this business is not super interesting to me, or at least it doesn't affect what I'm trying to create, because I think the mission is always what am I currently obsessed with, and then those things that I'm currently obsessed with often are weird and a little dirty and messed up, and then I just want to speak to-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Wow. I am not here to disagree with you.

Bilal Baig:

Yeah. I don't know.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Accurate self-read. But then again, it's part of the magic.

Bilal Baig:

Totally. Wouldn't you say, too, that for, I'm thinking like a piece like cake, in experiencing it, my gut told me that you really could not care less, in terms of TPM subscriber base, whether they bust down the door to get in to see the piece or not.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. That's my general sentiment. Kurt always says it's for who it's for. That's, I think, one reason why I think it's really important to be really clear on the marketing end on telling the story of what the story is

and bringing the right people in and bringing people who want what it is that you're offering, and I think which cleverly segues to a question I had about your interest in specificity of titling, because I do think that that's the starting point. I think there are 1,000 pockets where we hide secrets and signals to tell people what's for them, but I know that you're particularly attentive to titles, so I want to talk about the title for the piece that you originally came into the unit with and all the ideas that are packed inside of that. Can you talk to me about that?

Bilal Baig:

Totally. Yes. The piece that I came into it right from the hip with is called, or was called, I don't know what it's called anymore, but initially it was called Blue Eyes Killed Him Without Blinking. I was upset. Part of it was I started writing the piece during the winter, but I had also spent, in my younger years, a couple of seasons working at Baskin-Robbins through the winter, which is the biggest oxymoron, or whatever the thing is. Why is an ice cream shop open in the winter? I was just obsessed with cold and I was bitter, I was really angry at the police and I just equated them to be this cold, heartless, unpenetratable force of ice. That's where the blue and the non-blinking came from. That's how I perceived that entire force institution, whatever.

Bilal Baig:

I love a long title. Why don't we have more long titles? I just wanted to ensure that, through the title of that piece, it was going to be clear that I was going to be wrestling with material that is very, very serious, and then the image always was to locate it in an ice cream shop. Just for the contrast of... Well, also, in my opinion, violence happens everywhere anywhere, and so why not smash these things together? And then I want it to happen in February, drag people out into the cold just to see something that also feels cold. But also me, I'm twisted, so I love humor and I just think human people always are so funny, so that would have lived in it, too. Anyways.

Bilal Baig:

Yeah, the point of that title and why it came out in English for me was because I was like, "This is going to be something that I would want that isn't necessarily centering, or they're speaking queer and trans people, that this is a story that has a couple different characters in it from different racial backgrounds." It was important to me that it... It just wouldn't make sense if that story came out with an [inaudible 00:26:10] title because it's actually, of the things that I've created so far, it's the one that's the furthest from trying to center that community, and perhaps the one that I'm struggling with the most, and that being the reason why.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. I wonder if I can ask you a little bit about the struggle. The struggle is beautiful and the struggle is the work. I just think we always end up there in a struggle place at some point in the process, and so I wonder about pushing through versus being like, "Okay, this is not the thing," and how you make that kind of a call, but also just, in this case or in general, how do you choose to approach that, like, "I don't think the thing I started doing is the thing I'm still doing." That's a natural place that we get to, but then how do you move through that?

Bilal Baig:

Yeah. I think this piece, oh my God, maybe I'll spend my whole life trying to write it. I've struggled with it before. Before I was in right from the hip with the piece, I was developing it through factories writing



program, Foundry, I think. I had completed that first draft and I had stopped because it started to feel like a research essay, like a political research, here's the facts I learned about Googling black people in Canada. And I was like, "Why? Why me? What am I doing?"

Bilal Baig:

I know when I've lost my heart in something and it's all up in my mind, and so it felt like that's where that piece moved and it was all brainy, and so I knew it was right to shove it then. And then, coming back to it this time around with you, I was wide-eyed and ready to get in the dirt of it and throw it out and rip it apart and try things again. I think one of the key differences in me when I started writing the piece and where I'm at now is the way I've woven in activism in my life has changed, and so when I started writing the piece three years ago, I needed to prove that I was a good human and that I cared about issues, different issues, and the way to do it was through my art, and so then Terragon Theatre could see that I care about a diverse range of issues. Now, it's just like, "Oh, my God. Fuck that." Every day, I'm doing activist work.

Bilal Baig:

If that was the core of the piece while I was writing this show to prove that they're an activist, it's redone my perception of how I see myself and myself as an artist and an activist has really, really changed. I think that's a core thing that rocks the heart center of the piece. That doesn't mean throw it out and never look at it again. I think I have to find my way back into it that comes from a pure place or a truer place as to where I am now. I think the answer for me, and I know this doesn't shock anybody, is it lies in sex.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I genuinely didn't see it coming.

Bilal Baig:

No, I know you didn't.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

What happened here? I didn't see it coming at all.

Bilal Baig:

Because I kept saying, I was like, "I love the relationship between the brown dude and his black gender queer partner, and they're just always fighting, and it's like their relationship should never work, and they're in high school, or on that cusp of finishing high school and the doors are open for the future, and I'm like there's something there, and then I just, of course, love a brown mom, a brown, bitchy mom.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

You, too?

Bilal Baig:

She should be somewhere in there, but I think the thing that I feel the most activated by is this dynamic between these two and just the image of black and brown people touching each other and having sex sometimes, and then really disagreeing about other things or calling each other in and, "Where are you

right now for me?" Anyways. Those are the things that I feel like maybe, me at my core, I'm better at attacking rather than... I think there are some writers who are brilliant academics and philosophers, basically, who can take a political essay and make some beautiful art out of it. But I know now, that's not who I am, and I think a couple years ago when I started writing the piece, I thought, "You know what? Let's shock the world. Let me try to be this kind of a writer." And I'm not.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I promise you're going to shock the world. You're currently in the process of shocking the world. No worries there. I see what you're describing as having drawn a landscape in order to find out that these figures in the picture are the picture you really want to draw. In that way, that's all good work because all of this ends up inside of this. Right? It all ends up around it, under it, and holding it together because it's so visible. I think that's a really valuable discovery. But it does lead me to think about the connection between work in community and the art that you create in terms of both time and energy spent, but also the possibility of symbiosis. How does your presence in community feed into your creation work and vice versa?

Bilal Baig:

Oh my. There's so many ways to, I think my mind just split different ways to answer that question. Can you ask it one more time and then maybe I can-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Okay, but it's going to be a whole different question this time, because that's how my brain works.

Bilal Baig:

Okay. Sorry. Sorry.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

No, no, no. It's all good. I want you to think around the mutual relationship between your art and your activism, or not even activism, community, work in the community, presence in the community, how those things speak to you and how they inform each other.

Bilal Baig:

I think that I've always... I am so curious about either meeting people or characters who have something to say or want to say something, and either it takes them an eight week program to say it, or it takes them the course of a play to say the thing, and it's done in a way that's uniquely in their own voice. I think that, in so many ways, the writing and the community work is just about sitting with people and sometimes waiting around, sometimes making jokes or eating together to be there for someone while they figure out what they want to say.

Bilal Baig:

This thing about wanting to say something, I don't know, I'm trying to not sound gross about it. It's like going back to the trans gems program, and one of the girls was like, "I want to write a breakup, fuck you, I'm better than you," piece. I think helping her get to identifying that that's the thing that she wanted to do in that current moment in time, and then following that through, she's chasing that sentiment and I'm running behind her being like, "Yes. Go, go. Get it." And then...

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:36:04]

Bilal Baig:

Being like, "Yes, go, go. Get it." And then, landing on it. And it's shifted and it hasn't, but I just feel that capture the moment in time that felt really right for her. And it felt, obviously, really great for me that she was able to see it all the way through. And then, I think if that is the thing that genuinely excites me, being around for people in that way, whether I knew it or not, years ago, before I had started doing the community work and was only writing, I think that's what I was doing with my characters too. It really did feel like, I'm just sitting down with you and we'll just stare at each other. And you say something, I might ask you a question about it or I might not. But then, with the characters, I guess it would just actually be a little bit weirder because I'd be talking to myself, basically, and then, typing things out.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Like out loud, talking to yourself? Is that how you work?

Bilal Baig:

Yeah, yeah. I do. I just haven't really written... The last thing I had written for theater was a solo show. And so, that didn't really require too.... It's really when a character is trying to say something to somebody else in a scene, or trying to figure something out, or they're having an argument, that's when I really talk out loud, but not as the other character. As I'm like a therapist for one character being like, "[crosstalk 00:37:44] really want to say?" Or whatever. And that's a really bad therapist, but I do that. Yes. But with the last thing that I wrote, that was really super internal and not a lot of talking out loud. So, I think, to answer your question, it really depends on the piece and what the piece needs from me.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. Interjection, I'm loving these frames. I had to say.

Bilal Baig:

Oh, yes.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. The shape of it. [crosstalk 00:38:17]

Bilal Baig:

Thanks, [crosstalk 00:38:17]. It's like bad librarian.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. That's the only kind there is, as far as the general public imagination. It's all bad librarian. Oh, no. There's shush librarian too, I guess. And then, it goes [inaudible 00:02:34]. Here we are. Great. Something really recent. Maybe it's not that recent for you. Super recent though, is that you were published. And I was wondering, number one, can I see your book? What? Hell yeah. Acha Bacha. Fantastic. Who's the cover artist?

Bilal Baig:

Harmeet Rahal.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Nice. Good work, Harmeet.

Bilal Baig:

Yes. Very good work.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

And yeah. How is that? You're holding your play in your very little hands.

Bilal Baig:

I know. Look, I'll be totally real. I geeked the fuck out. When this actually came in, I, essentially, slept with the book. You know what I mean? That kind of thing where you just-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

As you do.

Bilal Baig:

You hold it-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

As one does.

Bilal Baig:

You put it down, and you keep just picking it up after 10 minutes. And that was the first couple of days. Then, I got tired and stopped doing that, but I remember, and I write about this in the afterwards section, or whatever you call it, at the end of the book, but I write about in grade 10 was the first time I read a play, read any kind of writing that actually made me feel something. Because prior to that, my first language is not English. And then, I was in the school system, and it was just like... We were being asked to read things that just never really connected for me. And that was all through grade school and high school.

Bilal Baig:

And then, it was, of course, drama class, and I picked up this play... Or my drama teacher actually said, "You might this." And I read it. And it was so messed up, the sequence, that jolted these contradictory feelings in me. And then that's when I was like, "Oh my God." For me, particularly, it wasn't novels. It wasn't poems. This is the medium that can actually evoke some deep, huge feelings in me, I want to be able to provide that for maybe somebody else. I thought the nature... I knew nothing about theater and play writing at that point. But my understanding then was, "Oh, a playwright is somebody who just writes books that get published. Playwrights get published."

Bilal Baig:

And that was the very naive assumption I had in grade 10. And I didn't even know about live productions, really, at that point. And then, the ball with Acha Bacha just rolled and rolled, and rolled, and a production happened. And that was great. And then, getting this published book really just... It's all connected the dots a bit. I was in grade 10, I think, just over 10 years ago. And so, it's little full circle. But also, yes, this idea that we might have the ability to invoke some serious feelings in other people when they read our work. And I just feel closer to maybe making that happen through a book, whereas the live production, it came and went. And so, if you missed it, you missed it. And I'm really excited about... Fuck, classrooms, right? What if this book ends up in a classroom for some little brown kid in Brampton and anyways... Right? All that shit.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. All of that. Well, and because often, it does take one teacher finding a thing and bringing it into a classroom for it to get there, as opposed to just those things being on the curriculum. I wonder if you'd shout out some contemporary artists that we'd be lucky to find. Who are you reading?

Bilal Baig:

Oh my God. So, Oh my God. I know it's bad... No, it's not bad. A friend of mine just published a book of poems, and that book is called Zom Fam, Z-O-M dash F-A-M, and Kama La Mackerel is the writer poet. And she's a real gem. Actually, is the person who wrote the forward in Acha Bach, so [crosstalk 00:07:22].

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Great.

Bilal Baig:

But, yes. Oh my God. Her writing, and her use of the page, and the spaciness feels it's traveling time, literally, and geography... Anyways, yes. I'm currently reading right now, and then, to just be really honest, I don't have a lot of energy in the day to be doing much else. So, it's really just, that's what I've got going on. It's a book of poems. It's not super large, but not super short either. And I've just very slowly making my way through them.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. That's the way to do it. That's the way to make your way through poetry. Really awesome. I wonder where are you in process right now? I feel like you're often doing several things simultaneously. Is that where you are now? Or are you in that thoughtful space on an ongoing way?

Bilal Baig:

No, I'm really much in this, I'm doing a million things in a current moment, on a daily basis, right now. But weekends are really lovely. This is actually really nice, and it's nice... I'm actually at a point right now where I just have to carve out time to even think, to reflect, and actually talk, and have someone ask me about what I'm reading. Oh my God. Nobody [crosstalk 00:45:02] asked that in forever. So, thanks.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Thank you for sharing. I'm always looking for... It's hard to choose poetry by unknown voices. But, wow, do we ever have access to so much of it online now? So many readings of folks I wouldn't have

otherwise encountered? Okay. Here's a challenge that I'm encountering in this moment and in life, and I put it to you. I'm looking for a crash course in Bilal's way of managing a million things. And specifically, in this moment, what I'm thinking about is living in numerous stories at the same time, having several works on-the-go, and having to go into that world. And then, just enter that one. It's very quantum leap. And as a [inaudible 00:10:06], my question is what is Bilal's crash course in a way to survive that jumping from world to world? I don't ask much.

Bilal Baig:

Well, to me, I can see how, maybe, there's an understanding that this idea of jumping can be a hard, or a sharp thing, or a thing that requires these hard turn pivots. And I don't approach it that way. I think that, for me, it becomes easier when I tell myself this is about an easing into something, or a falling into something, or I'm slowly rolling into something, even when there isn't time, necessarily. I think that when I think about jumping different story worlds, or even different hats I have to put on for different projects, approaching it with a softness, like a kind of, I'm not going to turn a sharp corner and enter this world. That just doesn't work for me. I guess, what's helped me, but I feel this has to be true for you too, is I'm at a place right now in my life where I've really chosen the nature of the stories that I want to participate in.

Bilal Baig:

So, I'm no longer doing the theater school job that I said that I would do because it would make some ex-director see me or... None of that, really, none of that is happening in my life anymore. And so, the nature of the stories that I'm attracted to all live in a similar-ish world, which is about... I'm obsessed with moving through violence and trauma. And here we go again, sex, and finding yourself or-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Feel surprised.

Bilal Baig:

Who you are, or how you identify, and through other people... Anyways. And the things I say "yes" to now all feel like they're in a similar wheelhouse. So, the ability to roll into something rather than jump into something is possible for me. But probably, that's because I have the privilege to set up my life in that way. Do you know what I mean?

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I know exactly what you mean. Yeah. Some of my plays are definite neighbors to the others. Those people could live right over there, and they just didn't bump into each other in these particular two stories I'm telling, in terms of a general world or a... Yeah. There's also something just about the permeability of space between your stories or of ideas that resonate equally in more than one story, which I think is typical of most writers, that there's a thing that you know you're obsessed with and the thing that you don't know you're obsessed with, but we can all see it.

Bilal Baig:

Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

And if you have good friends, they'll let you know, but it might take years for the pattern to emerge. But those things, right? So, there is a thing that is consistent across your work that is intentional and something else that's just there.

Bilal Baig:

Okay. Maybe I was wrong to assume that you're in a similar place, because if you're talking about the work you are doing through the 54-ology, those aren't neighbors, right? You're really jumping from places to- [crosstalk 00:50:12].

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Sometimes, sometimes. But if I'm within an age group, those become neighbors to me because it's a similar school system across most colonized spaces. The school system is this very specific British structure. And so, those things are like, oh, I recognize this place, like a place I've been. Yeah. How one time, I turned a corner in Mozambique, and I was like, "Oh, Trinidad. What happened?" And I was confused. And then, I always turned that corner, even if I wasn't going that way. It was like, they're not the same. I know they're not the same, but I recognize this.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

And so, that makes it more of a roll than a jump for me. Or more of a cousin than a stranger. But yeah, I really liked the idea of rolling and I liked the idea of intentional gentleness. Yeah. What a difficult work this would be to do if we had to do it brutally. Just open up your soul and throw knives in. Hardly graphic. But then, that's something that's potentially within our control to be like, if I know that's one way of doing it, how do I arrange to do it this other way? How do I arrange a knife-free process? Unless I have apples. I mean, there's always an exception.

Bilal Baig:

Yes. Because sometimes, I've had to be like, "No, stop rolling. Just jump in." That actually is better for the process or for your mind, or to really... Do you end things artistically? Do you have a hard end?

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Publication. Up to that minute. Up to, we're going to the printers today, are you sure? That's my hard end. Then I'm like, "Well, people saw it. So, if it's wrong, I'm a fool, and that's documented now." But, no, I think much you, as you were talking about Acha Bacha, going through quite a process, and also, Blue Eyes went through several processes, that there is an end to where this iteration of it is landing. And then, there is the space that you need from it. And then, you're in a new process. And this new process happens to start with a sapling, not a seed. And that's freeing and restricting. Yeah. Returning to something is like a special kind of hellscape. You're a different person, so you're actually just revising someone else's work. And you know a lot about that person, but you're not them.

Bilal Baig:

Totally. And I think that the greatest gift about being able to have spent enough time returning to Blue Eyes through this process has been at least to identify that, what I was talking about earlier, that I think the intention to write the piece was grounded in something that I just no longer feel I am anymore, or I have to prove anymore. And so, that takes the ground out from the play a little bit. And to come back to

it when I feel like I actually can, at least I have that, at least I've identified, I think, to the best of my ability, why it feels so alien to me.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. And what...

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Bilal Baig:

It feels so alien to me.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. And what aspects still feel urgent for you? I think that's ... I'm a strong believer in value your impulses. So sometimes I'm just like, "I wrote that down. I'm going to put it on the wall until I know what it means." I don't know what it means but it's been born, it's my responsibility now. And yeah, and sometimes the scenes that you write first are the hallway you need to go through to get to where the play actually lives. You got to believe it or I won't get to the next draft [inaudible 00:00:42]. Help me.

Bilal Baig:

I don't know. You're whipping out all this super poetic stuff about hallways.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

If you don't see the inherent poetry of a hallway, then I can't help you.

Bilal Baig:

Yeah. That's great. No, I'm going to write that down now. I love that. It's the hallway and then you get to the room.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

And then as we all do when we arrive in rooms, burn the hallway down. That's how we all go through life.

Bilal Baig:

Fuck that hallway.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Well, I'm in the room now, who needs hallways? Get rid of it. Awesome. I think that's how you end up in a David Bowie end of labyrinth palace with all those upside down [inaudible 00:55:31] and stuff is throwing stuff out before you're really done with it. So I always keep the draft bucket. The like, "I think this is garbage but future me might make a quilt." I don't know what future me is going to do with it.

Bilal Baig:

Yes.



Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yes. One day when we invent the machine that repurposes old writing to something that re-inspires you. Oh, what? Stop. Are you an engineer? Can we make this machine that your bad writing goes in the machine and then what comes out? Is it something you can hold? It's like music. And it's just for you to hear that one time. And that's what you get from your bad writing. And then you walk away. Okay, go make it. I'm going to send over some hammers.

Bilal Baig:

What? You do it. You should-

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I can't. I already did my part. Finished. I'm done. That was my contribution.

Bilal Baig:

Oh my God.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

My contribution is desire. That's all I had.

Bilal Baig:

That is really beautiful though. Maybe in the future. We're entering this age of anything is possible.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Yeah. You know what? I'm going to try. I'm going to try to build it. Anything's possible. I'm going to try my best to build it. Okay. Well, I want to ask you before we wrap, about your immediate or eventual future. Where is your art compass pointed now or your heart compass?

Bilal Baig:

Well, could I talk about my heart a little bit?

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Oh my God, could you?

Bilal Baig:

Yeah.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Could you a lot?

Bilal Baig:

I had a birthday recently-ish.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Happy.

Bilal Baig:

Thank you. It was on the 21st of October and I'm just letting everyone know so I can get more gifts next year.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I want you to know, for what this is worth, if my birthday was on October 21st, it would still be my birthday. So feel free.

Bilal Baig:

Right.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Feel Free. You know what, I offer you an extension on me. It's still Bilal's birthday.

Bilal Baig:

Yeah. Thanks. Well yeah, that was one of the times where I forced myself to reflect on things just because I'd been operating at such a pace and wasn't able to really think about things. And then I had celebrated that birthday not totally in the way that I wanted to just because there was a lot of work that day. But then some really lovely moments. And I think really the things that have clarified for me going into the future are just, it's really just about... I've loved so much of what I've been able to do in my recent ish life leading up to pandemic and through the pandemic and a lot of that love came through the form of working with these nonprofits, running programming for children and under-resourced neighborhoods in Toronto and then doing the stuff with the Amy project and the trans gens.

Bilal Baig:

I just have a feeling that if I can continue to be myself in the world and tell the stories that I genuinely do want to tell, that the hope is that... I told myself for so many years that no one would ever want to hear from somebody like me. I totally accepted and fully believed that for maybe almost 20 years of my life. And that's a long time. And to undo that, I'm in the beginning I think of it. And we'll spend a lot of time undoing that belief, what permeates your entire body and definitely your sense of self-worth. And so I think it's clear to me that I want to keep doing the list of things that I have on the go.

Bilal Baig:

I'm happy to keep doing them because I'm so good at actually really liking myself too, that I know when to sleep and I know when to eat and I know when to not check my email and watch the Weakest Link. So all the self care stuff is really embedded into my life and therefore means that I can do the other things that I want to do. And any way. So the work forward for me is, tell the stories you want to tell and then hang out with people, little kids and trans girls, and just rock with them and maybe they'll tell their own story too. And I could do that for the rest of my life. And how it happens doesn't really matter to me.

Bilal Baig:

For some reason, yes... You know what I mean? Sorry, and to go back to the first thing, my birthday helped me just really sit deeply in this feeling because I hadn't [inaudible 01:01:48] bad at looking back

and reflecting. I wish my mother would ask for my resume sometimes. She really [inaudible 01:01:56] furthest thing from that, but to reflect on the things I have done and to trust that those are things that really do in their own ways, make a difference and really feel that they're folded into the overall mission of my life or the reason why I think I'm here on this earth. And it is just to do my part and maybe making this world a little bit more of a kinder place. And I think we can only do that through genuinely listening and seeing the person in front of us. And if they want to write about whatever, you hold that. And then not to contradict what I've said earlier, if you know the person well enough, then you can say, "No, don't fucking write about trees. Write about a burger." That's the life lesson.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Oh, my. Okay, speaking of the string of profundities, so much that I needed to hear in there, including, "I'm good at liking myself." Such a take away.

Bilal Baig:

Oh, for sure. Look, and I don't think we're afforded that. Okay look, I sometimes like to assume what other people think about me all the time. An assumption could be, "Oh my God, this person is probably..." Either people think I'm so overworked, I'm dying every day, or that I'm a trans person of color and I'm terrified for my life constantly, which there is truth in all of that. Absolutely. But I wanted to start saying out loud, I really do like myself. And it's work.

Bilal Baig:

I wasn't wired, I didn't come into this world liking myself. I spent fucking 20 years not liking myself. So to be able to say that, and a lot of that has to do with therapy and a really lovely therapist I have right now. But yes. So yes, I firmly believe in that. And this is a nice practice. In the pandemic life, we're not really talking enough to our loved ones or at least I'm not. I'm not connecting with people in the way that I would regularly. And so I haven't been able to say something like that. So I'm saying it with you and thanks for getting me there. And now I'm going to just say it. I'm just going to say it to anyone as I'm walking.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I'm so glad I got to hear you say it. You said it with conviction. It didn't sound first ditch.

Bilal Baig:

Good. Okay.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

I wonder, Bilal, if you would be willing to share anything with us today from your writing.

Bilal Baig:

Yeah look, okay I pulled up a little thing. I did a next stage show earlier this year and the piece was called [inaudible 00:11:04]. And I wrote the thing and I performed in it and I really fell in love with this character. And so I thought I would just read a little section from her speech but I don't want to act. So I'm just going to read it. She's got this gorgeous little accent and she... But I think let's just strip it all down.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

Playwright reading.

Bilal Baig:

Right. Everyone's just going to hear my real voice reading this real ass text. What? Okay. So I'm going to read a short excerpt from a piece I wrote called [inaudible 00:11:52]. Okay, here we go. Have you ever thought how your body is a top secret map of all the scars and bumps and dark spots you possess? Someone can run their fingers over your map, but they do not know what caused the landscape to be the way it is. They do not know why it is in so much pain. Last year, I crack my head open. Can you believe? So stupid, total duffer I am. Typical me, I am running late on my first day of city college and I am chasing the bus down the road in totally stupid sneakers. And I fall face first onto the road, forehead burst open, and it felt like everything came out. I feel the blood spilling down my cheeks, past my lips onto the road, droplets making the pool of red wider and wider.

Bilal Baig:

I keep thinking, "I am forgetting everything." Forgetting myself as I sit there. Cars and motorbikes buzzing right by. Side of the busy road. Does no one care? I keep thinking, per chance, I am to be reborn. Per chance, my body is to start again as anything I want so long as I stay even more pure to who I am to be this time. I say yes. Yes to purity. Yes to more, more life nonstop living. Yes. This time, allow the architecture of my landscape to morph from the pool of red to a sea of blue, to a pink sand beach, to the pebbles rocks boulders in a stream, to secure mountain and the very insecure volcano right next to it, to the shape of every cloud in our sky and to the tallest tree in the whole wide world that can reach its arms into our solar system. Yes. Yes. Trace your fingers all over my map, rub every bump and groove, crumple and uncrumple me, risk entering every dark spot to really totally see me, my purity.

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard:

We want to thank the audience for joining us for this conversation and reading and invite you to check out the rest of the fantastic offerings of the festival by scrolling right where you are. And most of all, I want to thank Bilal Baig for joining me for this conversation. Thank, Bilal.

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