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[Episode 65: Anna Kahn](#) (Recorded, March 2016)

Host: Lizzy Palmer – LP

Guest: [Anna Kahn](#) – AK

Transcript edited by David Turner – 28/01/2017

Conversation:

LP: Hello. This is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. I am Lizzy Palmer and I am joined today in my flat by the wonderful Anna Kahn. Hello Anna.

AK: Hello, thank you for having me.

LP: It's been a long time coming [AK: It has!] this little chat. How are you?

AK: I'm good yeah. I feel like I'm in a kind of stable happy place of life which is, [LP: Excellent] unusual and interesting yeah.

LP: Wonderful. Well, as usual we'll start with a poem.

AK: Cool. So, this poem is called Elvis and it was written as part of the [Barbican Young Poets](#) programme which I've taken part in this year which I figure will probably be talking a bit more about it later. So, this is Elvis.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:01:38]

LP: Thank you. So, Anna why poetry?

AK: Why poetry? There are two answers to this question which are kind of equally true depending on who I am and on a given day I suppose. So, the one poets like is poetry because it's the most, I think the most succinct way of saying anything. You can have a film that's two-hours long or you can have a poem that's twenty-five lines and I think a lot of the time the poem can carry as much impact as the film.

And I find that really satisfying... The absolute blunt power of it which is one reason. And then the other reason is that I'm a little bit of a kind of an electricity junkie I suppose. So when I was a teenager I found a lot of electricity. There was a massive salsa scene in my local area and it was like really good. You could be guaranteed if you went along you'd have three or four absolutely magic spaces of three or four minutes in the night with you know absolute magic with another person and all there is them and you and dancing.

And then I found this kind of similar vibe, I used to sing a lot of music with my dad who's quite an accomplished folk guitarist and I'd sing and he played guitar and everybody would be like, "Ah, they're really sweet!" And in those rooms you could be guaranteed some electricity.

And I think poetry performance spaces are the spaces where I found the most of that. So if you go to somewhere like [Forget What You Heard](#) or the [Boomerang Club](#) or you know many events, you are guaranteed long periods of electricity where you're of kind of hanging on the edge of your seat.

And I think as a performer it's really easy to generate that electricity in these spaces because the audiences are really up for that. And that's a thing that I find magic and I think poets are often less keen on that answer because implicit in it, is that if the scene starts to die off I'll probably go and do something else.

LP: What have been your main influences as a writer and or performer?

AK: As a writer and or performer? I tend to just blurt out wherever I've been reading recently in response to questions like that. So, at the moment that's [Charles Simic](#) and [Kei Miller](#). Who else have I read recently? [Eduardo C. Corral](#) has kind of blasted up my idea of how to kind of talk about being queer, unapologetically but not sensationally I suppose. So, I'm having to kind of sit down and rethink how I talk about ladies as a result of reading *Slow Lightning*.

What else in the longer term? So, as a performer... I think the spaces that I've been in have been very influential and the variety of people that you get within them. So, you've got the kind of the [Rob Autons](#) of the world where it's kind of almost stand-up [comedy] and I do love a bit of stand-up so actually let's add like [Dylan Moran](#) and [Eddie Izzard](#) and [Simon Munnery](#)...

Those guys as an influence on the kind of the one side and then you've got someone like Rachel Nwokoro or [inaudible] on the other side who are these... These big emotions used almost violently. It's like poetry as a kind of act of huge intensity as violence, or something. I'm not entirely sure that I'm making sense.

LP: I know what you mean. It's hard to put into words.

AK: And yeah, I think that, the vastness of what is out there means I am struggling to pick out individual inspirations. I like being a hoover you know and taking it all in.

LP: Yeah definitely. Just out of interest because I don't think I know this about you. How long have you been writing for? Poetry, I mean.

AK: Poetry? How old am I? I'm twenty-five. So, like four years, four and a half years. Yeah, I wandered past [The Poetry Café](#) one day and some interesting looking people spilled out of it. I've got sort of permanent one-upmanship with my dad, whereby like it's whoever discovers 'the cool place' gets the most points. So, I just got into the habit of, if I see interesting looking people walking out of a place I'm like, "What's that."

And then I saw they had an open-mic and I think I had one poem and I took the one poem to the open-mic and it was like a funny one and I think I'd gone after some like a few fairly miserable and not that great people. So, I got a massive hit of audience reaction which is... I mean that's how you get people addicted to things right? You give them one massive load of positive chemicals.

LP: An electric shock, if you will.

AK: Yeah it was like an electric shock!

LP: Amazing. On that note, we'll have the second poem please.

AK: Cool. So, this is another Barbican one. One of the Barbican challenges was to write a poem in a rhetorical form, so like a poem that's a letter or a poem that's like a restaurant

menu or whatever. And I'm a massive like snark, so I came back with a poem called "Three Physicists Walk Into a Classics Department for an Open Unit" and it goes like this.

[The author has not approved this poem for transcription.]

[00:08:52]

LP: Thank you. I was trying not to giggle. So, Anna, I feel like because you're one of my very good friends that my questions are kind of just things that I'm interested in and that I want to know. So, I was going to ask... Well your poetry, to me, is very full of what appears to be your actual soul and I do believe everything you say. So, I was wondering if this is something you've always aimed for? If it just happens? Or whether you're just a very convincing performer and I'm gullible?

AK: This is an interesting one. So, my, as I think you know outside of this podcast, my mum's family are Iraqi and we're all quite loud and shouty. And I think that means I've kind of grown up having to get my point across at very loud volume quite accurately, whatever I'm trying to say. So, I think that does lend itself to a performance poetry that's kind of in line with my personality if that makes sense.

LP: Yeah.

AK: But also, and I'm just going to kind of pray that nobody from my mum's family finds this, a lot of them are quite compulsive liars. And I definitely have to work quite hard not to do that. So, I think there is an element of performance in what I do, a slightly artificial performance but also... I suppose having sung for a very long time I'm kind of used to... This is maybe not so much the poetry but I'm answering the question about performance, even though that's not quite what you asked but never mind.

AK: I think with singing I kind of learned to just drag some emotion from somewhere and use it for the song whether it's the sort of actual relevant emotion or not and I think I have brought that to poetry. I get asked questions about rawness quite a lot and like how are you not afraid to be raw on stage. I think part of that is, it's not necessarily the rawness of whatever poem it is I'm reading it's just... Whatever my current anchor is.

LP: Yeah.

AK: I'm just pushing that out and I think it comes across, that that anger or the emotion is real but perhaps not that it's not specific to the poem. Does that make sense?

LP: Yeah.

AK: Good.

LP: Thank you for clearing that up for me! So perhaps next you could tell us about what you've got going on at the moment, writing wise, or you know your most recent projects if

you're not working on anything at the moment. Maybe here you could talk about the Barbican Young Poets?

AK: Yeah, I mean that's basically what it feels like all I've been doing since October and to be honest I've got nothing coming up because I just needed a break from... Really intensive focus on poetry.

LP: It happens!

AK: So yeah, Barbican has been massive. So, it's like, for anyone who doesn't know what it is, it's run by The Barbican Centre in partnership with the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. I think that's the right name hopefully they won't shoot me if they find this and it's not. It's headed up by [Jacob Sam-La Rose](#) and co-tutored by [Rachel Long](#).

And it's like two hours a fortnight but it's normally it's three hours because we run over and everyone wants to stick around to do more poetry. Which is great but also exhausting when you've had, however many months it's been from October to now of it. And you are... I've written so much poetry it's ridiculous.

LP: That's great!

AK: Yeah so like both of these and a whole portfolio of other stuff. I'm normally quite a prolific writer but I tend to discard most of what I write or sort of read it through a couple of times and go, no that's not that interesting. And it's the kind of a few polished gems that slip through into my standard repertoire.

LP: Yeah.

AK: But, I've basically properly edited everything I've written, for Barbican, which is ridiculous. So, I have loads of material!

LP: That's great, I'm very envious.

AK: I think I am only just young enough to do it for... But for under twenty-fives... I so wholeheartedly recommend... Just the amount of stuff you're given to read as well. [**LP:** Yeah.] They gave us like two massive reading packs and a whole load of further recommendations for books about how to write poetry as well and kind of lots of poetics and lots of different writer's poetics.

LP: That's one of my favourite things about doing a writing course is that you just get so much wider reading that you never would have found, probably. That's great, well done.

AK: I'm not sure I deserve a 'well done' but thank you.

LP: You do for sure! Maybe we can have your third and final poem?

AK: Sure. So, having talked about being Iraqi.... Sorry I'm dying of cold... So, having talked about being Iraqi, I figure this is an appropriate one to end on. It's a poem for my mother and it's called;

Like The English

Iraqi Jews say heart as *khalb*, like Iraqi Muslims do
but the endearment - my heart - the way you'd call a child

is *ghulbie*, as it is in Egyptian. Mum doesn't know why this is.
Iraqi Jews rarely say thanks. They use *merci* with each other;

shukran only to Muslims. The closest they come to please
is *da'hubbuk*: *I would love you if you -*

Mum says, *pass me the milk, da'hubbuk*. I say, *you wouldn't
love me if I didn't pass you the milk?* She raises her hand

to hit me like you'd hit a drum if you wanted it to ring. She does
that thing she does with her chin. She has her dad's deep-set eyes

but her expression is her mother's, is her mother's sister's,
is her mother's sister's daughter's. I pass her the milk.

She kisses my face like her mother used to: bordering on violent,
hands clamping my jaw. She calls herself more English than I am

even though I am the one who kisses like the English.

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LP: Wonderful. Thank you. So, where can our listeners find out more about your work?

AK: Right. You're looking at me with eyes that say feel guilty. [**LP:** No.] And I do feel slightly guilty because I don't have a website and I own a [Twitter](#) but I've probably forgotten the password I think at this point, it's been so long.

LP: That's nothing to feel guilty about.

AK: I'm sorry for being inaccessible and I get told off about it every now and again by poets you can find one and my poems in the Barbican Young Poets Anthology. I think it's called [Impossible Things About Optimism](#) and it's full of lots of beautiful poems... There are twenty-five poems from twenty-five poets and some amazing photography as well by [Amaal Said](#). So, I would definitely recommend the anthology but that's really the best I've got for you.

LP: The best way is just to make friends with Anna and then get her to tell you her poems. Why would you do it any other way?

AK: I always worry about this, I got introduced on stage the other day by an emcee saying that I give brilliant hugs. Then he came off like, at the interval and I'd done some quite emotional stuff and he gave me a massive hug and then when he let go there was a woman standing there and she literally, "That looked like a really good hug." Then just looked at me expectantly. So, I worry when you say, be friends with Anna.

LP: Well, it's just because I found it such a rewarding experience.

AK: I find being friends with you equally rewarding but...

LP: Send her a 'friend request' first so you have her permission. Don't just come and hug her at a gig.

AK: Yeah please don't do that.

LP: So finally, could you give our listeners some recommendations for things that you've enjoyed recently and it doesn't have to be poetry or spoken word gigs. It could be anything from cinema to books you've enjoyed, anything.

AK: I think so I think I mentioned Slow Lightning by Eduardo C. Corral before but I'll say that again slightly more slowly, that's an absolutely 'boss' collection. What else? I'm currently bashing through the works of, I think it's pronounced Zbigniew, but I'm not sure. Zbigniew Herbert.

LP: I don't know.

AK: Well that's good, check that out.

LP: Well we can Google it and write it underneath the video.

AK: Yeah, do that. I've got a massive completed works which I think might be out of print but it's good. And actually yeah, The Art and Craft of Poetry by Michael Bugeja, I think is another one I'm not quite sure how it's pronounced, if I'm murdering this please don't find me and yell at me.

And then in terms of wider stuff? I'm listening to a lot of Rudimental, that's probably not that interesting to people it's just what I like.

LP: It's what you're recommending, that's all that matters.

AK: Yeah that's what I listened to this afternoon at work. What else? I don't really watch films so I'm no use on that.

LP: That's fine, I think that'll probably do. Anyway, before we start giggling I'm going to round it off. Thanks very much Anna.

End of transcript.