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[Episode 88: Hannah Silva; Nick Makoha; John Hegley](#) – (21/11/2016)

Transcription by Christabel Smith

Producer: David Turner – **DT**

**Intro:**

**DT:** Hello, this is Lunar Poetry Podcasts. I'm David Turner. Today's episode is in three parts. We've got interviews with poets Nick Makoha and John Hegley. If you'd like to find out about everything we're up to, follow us at Lunar Poetry Podcasts on Facebook, Tumblr and SoundCloud and at @Silent\_Tongue on Twitter or subscribe to us on iTunes or Stitcher. If you like what we do, please tell your friends.

First up is Hannah Silva. I met up with Hannah at Rosemary Branch theatre at Haggerston in London to talk about her solo show, Schlock!, which is on until November 26<sup>th</sup> 2016. There's a bit of background noise as there are some singers in the next room rehearsing an opera, but hopefully it's not too distracting.

You can find links to Hannah's web presence, as you can with Nick and John, in the description to this episode. Here's Hannah.

### **Part one:**

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guests: Hannah Silva – **HS**

**HS:** Hello David.

**DT:** How are you doing? Just a word of warning, there is a musical being rehearsed next door and you may hear some opera. We're here today to talk about your show which is on at the moment at the Rosemary Branch Theatre in, is this Hoxton?

**HS:** Yeah, Haggerston, Hoxton.

**DT:** By the canal anyway. It's a nice pub and theatre. Can you explain what the show is then we can chat about it?

**HS:** It's a show called Schlock!, it's a one-woman show, me basically. It started out by splicing together two very different books. I was reading, or attempting to read, 50 Shades Of Grey, struggling a bit. I started picking out the sentences that shocked me, not because of the sexual content, I don't find that shocking, but the bits where she says 'Please don't hit me, I don't like it, don't do it again' and the bits where there's an undercurrent of manipulation and abuse, but it's all closed in quite a light way, so I think you often don't really notice it when you read it. I found that quite interesting so I started picking out words and phrases and writing them down.

I've also been a bit obsessed with this novelist called Kathy Acker, who died in 1997. She was a cult feminist author who wrote by splicing together lots of different types of book, so she would take things like erotica, and true-life stories from magazines, and splice them together with novels, and put in bits of her autobiography or bits of phone conversations with her friends, to create really strange, disturbing narratives, often about abuse or filled with sex in a really disturbing way.

I was really interested in her as a writer and a person. She died in 1997 of breast cancer. I found myself telling her story using her writing methods. That seemed the best way to do that, so splicing together 50 Shades of Grey and doing things with that, together with her

writing and bits of her biography. I was exploring her story of how she dealt with her cancer diagnosis and doing those sections using sign language, where I kind of become Kathy.

It's not a particularly true biography of her. It's kind of about my Kathy now, the character I've created, but that's where it came from, so the piece deals with sex and subverting the language of 50 Shades, but it's not a critique of 50 Shades, it's more playful with that language. It becomes shocking when I do things like change the word submissive to mother and dominant to child, so you get a strange narrative of a parent and a child. Also, I work with a loop station, which is hidden behind a big pile of pages, so a lot of it is very sound-based. I layer up vocal sounds and articulations so it's got this level of music sound in it as well and then the sign language and the sub-titles going alongside.

**DT:** I was impressed with two elements of the show in particular. One was the layers, I found it really engaging and stimulating, there was a lot going on. I like it when shows and artists are... it sounds hugely condescending to call anyone brave, but I can't think of a better word. It becomes a risk, especially around spoken word, to make things simple and easy to engage with and I like the complexity of what you did.

Secondly, it made me want to read 50 Shades a little bit, because it elevated it. I've only ever spoken to one other person about 50 Shades, my aunt, she's a speed-reader, she rips through romance novels and the more titillating the better. She read 50 Shades and she was so disappointed, she hated it. What point did the other elements of technology come into this work?

**HS:** Right from the beginning, I guess. I write in different ways. Sometimes, I write plays for other people to perform. Sometimes, I write poetry just to be published. When I know I'm writing for myself to perform, quite often I'll start working with layers of sounds and using technology to do that quite early on. In a way, it's part of my writing process. Sometimes, I don't know if a piece works or the language works until I start playing around with the loop station and stripping out sounds and recording vowel sounds beneath it.

I actually did masses of writing before I got technology out for this piece, which can be quite unusual. I did a load of writing when I was on a train then had this huge amount of text and had to start playing with it, laying it out on the floor and seeing if there was a shape to it and where the peaks and troughs were, which bits worked in performance, which bits I could strip out and develop and make into something.

**DT:** A loop station sounds like a good tool to work through that process. It also seems daunting to have that much text. Was it solo processing?

**HS:** No, really early on I had a session with David Lane, who's a great dramaturge and I've worked with him previously. That was really early on in my process, but he read it on the page, then came and saw some bits I was playing with. At that point, he was struck by how completely different it was to read it then hear it. Really, the way something is said changes its meaning hugely, like I can pronounce some lines in quite a light way, whereas on the page they're... woah, that's really heavy.

So those are some of the things I have fun with each night, as I try to say lines in a different way, to not ever get fixed with my intonation. For me, that's the way to keep it alive every night.

**DT:** Even in the performances, is it continual layering of trying different things?

**HS:** Yeah, the sound layers are fixed. I make them live every night, but I know what I'm doing with them and they pretty much stay the same, but in terms of the intonation of each line, I try to do it differently every night. Not always, but the majority of it. That's how to keep it fresh and stop myself getting into autopilot. Also, because I've got a background in music, I'm quite good at knowing and learning in terms of how it sounds, so it's quite easy for me to fix the intonation and do it exactly the same every single time.

When I started out doing this kind of work, that's what I did. I would very quickly fix something and then be able to replicate it perfectly, which can be fun and I could compose and do some interesting things through doing that, but I also realised that if I take myself out of that and force myself to find a new way of saying each line every time, it keeps the material meaning something different to me every time I do it.

**DT:** A couple of things I took away from the performance were the themes of pain and submission. How did that develop?

**HS:** That was probably one of the first things I had. Some of the early things I did were things like doing a search on Kindle for all the instances of the word pain and that's a section now in the show. I did that, in a way, for fun. I looked for the word pain and the word hurt, I did some like intelligent, I tried to find out what's the language, what are the words.

**DT:** It sounds like a poets' night in. Pain and hurt.

**HS:** Yeah! Initially, I thought that working with that material, I was going to get a lot more humour than I've got. There's all the inner goddess stuff. You've haven't read 50 Shades, but she's constantly going on about inner goddess and her subconscious and having these competing parts of herself arguing, one of them's sitting in a hammock and one is twiddling her thumbs behind the sofa and one of them's getting excited.

It's so drawn out, it becomes quite crazy. I had a section where I took all the instances of inner goddess and subconscious, I thought that would be quite funny, but in the end, they didn't fit, I think because the piece became something else. It's not really a critique of 50 Shades or a piss-take of 50 Shades, it's about this other character and just plays with that language.

**DT:** I don't want to take the moral high ground here, it's easy to knock something and hide the fact you're not reading anything else, but I'm interested to know what the audience reactions have been. Do most people assume you are critiquing 50 Shades of Grey?

**HS:** I think they do. Also because critics, I mean I haven't had many reviews from the London run, but particularly people talking about it around this run have gone on about ripping the pages out of 50 Shades. Interestingly, there are two reviews that say 'chew the

pages up and spit them' and I don't. I don't. I don't chew a page ever. I've never chewed a page of 50 Shades of Grey, just for the record. I really don't know why people highlight that aspect of it. I think it sounds like I'm critiquing, it's like 'oh, she's ripping it up, she hates it so much'. It's really not like that. It's a playful thing. It's a writing method, it's exploring the literal texture of language and words.

**DT:** Has the reaction surprised you?

**HS:** It doesn't really surprise me, but it's definitely been highlighted more in this one than in the past. The only other place where that seemed to be the thing they jumped on was in India. I did it in Mumbai at Literature Live, a literature festival, which was great. There, I had a really big audience and I think a lot of people came to see me rip up 50 Shades of Grey. Of course, that's not really what the show is, but it's OK, it gets them through the door.

**DT:** How did you get all the books?

**HS:** That's one of the other things around this run, there were a few pieces in different papers saying 'Hannah Silva needs your copy of 50 Shades Of Grey' and I have had a few donated and sent. Still, audience members sometimes bring their copy or there have been a few in the post to the theatre, which has been really nice. I bought up all my local charity shops' a while ago and then found they weren't replenishing, I literally bought them all. It's charity shops and occasional emergency buy.

**DT:** Let's talk about signing, subtitling, the visual elements of the show.

**HS:** Signing is always something I've wanted to do. My work has always been and still is with this show, really sound-based. In the past, I've had blind people come to my work and really enjoy it and it's worked because it's so sound-based, but I've been aware that my work has never been accessible for a deaf audience. In a way, it was the ultimate challenge, to see if I could make it accessible and I guess I like setting myself really hard challenges.

I love sign language and maybe because I'm really interested in language and meaning, and I love the fact we go around doing these pretty empty, vague gestures constantly in daily life, I'm doing them now, I love the fact that in sign language, gestures become meaningful. I just think it's beautiful. I discovered it also made me write in a totally different way, so it's been amazing for me as a poet and it's made me think about my writing really differently and to think much more through imagery and it forces you to step into the writing.

I worked with Daryl Jackson, known as Dazee Jacko, he's a deaf translator and actor, he's really, really amazing. The way in which he was working with me was very much that I step into the piece and become Kathy and see everything she sees. Often, a few lines of text would become one glance in performance or other ways round. It totally transforms it. In the text, in the spoken version, I have an image of a child and an image of cancer and in the spoken language, cancer and child are very, very different things, but in sign language, if they're both inside the body and growing inside your body, you can actually do a sign that can be both. So rather than making that distinction and trying to put them together somehow in language, in the sign language, it can be both at once, which I found quite exciting.

**DT:** The part of the show when you were talking about the cancer was pretty powerful. What I liked about the signing, even as a hearing member of the audience, is it forces you to focus, it's a powerful tool to pull people into your body language.

**HS:** Yes and it's about looking at different ways of writing and different ways of using language and having those layers going on at the same time. Quite early on, I talked to various people who thought I wouldn't be able to do it, wouldn't be able to sign well enough, and said it's so hard to get a deaf audience to come, why would they want to come and see a hearing artist sign.

When I worked with Daryl, he had a slightly different attitude towards it and restored my belief in wanting to do it, saying it doesn't really matter if I don't reach a large deaf audience, it's a British language, it's incredible and it's really exciting to share that with a hearing audience as well. So I've tried to do both things, use it in a creative way, look at the poetry of it, look at the poetry of using the body and thinking no, this works for a hearing audience, but also to try and go all the way through and think about what a deaf audience member's experience of it is with the subtitling and with using images, as well.

I worked with the artist Tom de Freston, so in a way, he was translating my soundscapes into image. I thought a lot about whether it is accessible for a deaf audience member and I can't answer that perfectly, because I don't know, I haven't had that experience, but hopefully throughout this run, I'll get some feedback and find out. I'm very sure it's not at all perfect and there are so many things I could do better, but it's a really exciting thing to learn about and learn more about in future.

**DT:** I'm also interested in the elements of your show that through moving towards accessibility become inaccessible as well, because you have elements of the show where it's purely signing. I can't understand any sign, so visually stimulating and interesting, but I don't know what the meaning and context is. How important was that, to go the other way?

**HS:** When I started out doing the show, I had more sections that were just signed and not subtitled as well, so it was even harder. I got feedback from the hearing audience that they wanted to know what I was doing. I thought OK, fair enough, this is the majority of my audience and it's fun and interesting to start to figure out what the signs mean.

We watch dance and we don't go 'ooh, but I don't know what that movement meant' and I love dance, I love the way it triggers images in my imagination as I watch and it triggers words and thoughts, so I think, in those sections, it's also licence for the audience member to have their own interpretations of what it is.

They're quite small sections and there are bits in it you probably can figure out what I'm doing, cos it's not BSL, it's more like visual vernacular. I quite enjoy that, going 'actually, you've just got to look at me, look at my body', you don't have to crack it, you don't have to de-code it, but I think you can get a sense of what the emotion is, what some of the signs are and even if you have your own interpretation of it, that's exciting.

I'm always interested in opening up parts of performance to enable to the audience's imagination to come in and to go off in different directions. I've never really liked work that's told me what it means all the way through.

**DT:** That's what I was alluding to when I used the word brave. I do enjoy work that says clearly 'you're not really here to understand all this fully'. I think there's too much leaning on art productions in any form. Maybe, because of the funding methods in this country, there's a pressure to be fully understood. I also wonder if it's the influence of the dramaturge you worked with. Maybe because of my previous work with multi-screen film installation, I saw a lot of links.

There's one piece I worked on in Norway by an Icelandic artist, IA LISA ATTILA, she works with multi-screen cinematic installations. The screens are so big and positioned in such a way, you can never see all the action at one, so you have a choice. You can sit there and take it in in parts or you can go back and watch each screen over the course of seven hours. You can watch each film and try and piece it together, but in no way are you ever going to see everything that's happening at the same time.

**DT:** I'm projecting heavily my own thoughts onto your work, but do any of those things ring true with the way the piece came about?

**HS:** I think the screen stuff is really a consequence of trying to make it accessible for deaf and hard-of-hearing audience members. It's not really an aesthetic or a thing I'm really into. The way a loop station works anyway is through repetition and layering up so it is something that will really add layers.

**DT:** Just to clarify, when I linked it to film work, it wasn't directly because you use screens, it was the connection to layering.

**HS:** That's where I could connect with that. I don't always write in a very linear, top-of-page to bottom-of-page kind of way, it's much more of a looping, adding a bit, colliding this line with that line that I said a bit earlier and looking at what sound does. Going back to the meaning question, I also want the work to... I'm really not interested in whether people can walk out and go 'what she was doing was this and it was about this and this is how she did this', although that's quite tempting for people to do and something reviewers want, to write the synopsis of the show, I think that's quite a difficult thing to do in this case.

I'm much more interested in how people feel afterwards, what it does to your insides, what it does emotionally, what the layer of sound does to somebody or the images. It's really not supposed to be an intellectual exercise that has to be cracked by the audience. It makes me uncomfortable when I see tweets or everybody's going on about how clever it is or how clever I am. It's not. It's just that I made it in this particular way, that layers things up and plays around with language, it's not about trying to be clever.

**DT:** I really like physical performance. I think it's a mistaken belief that people can make spoken word completely accessible because language isn't very accessible. If you don't speak

English, none of this would be accessible anyway. That's quite a lot of people in the world who can't engage with the word.

**HS:** It's interesting, the word accessible, I'm sure people have written loads of fascinating stuff about that, but what does it really mean? It doesn't mean making something very simplistic and straight-forward. People often use accessible in that sense, but I mean making it something different people can access, whether that's physical access, which they can't in this venue, unfortunately, it's got a horrible staircase, but lovely venue.

**DT:** A lot of venues aren't accessible. There's a very important debate about that, whether the work's successful but the venue isn't.

**HS:** It's difficult. It might be accessible to some extent for a deaf audience member, but that doesn't mean it's easy to understand. There are different levels, like, well, it was all kind of there, but it would be very hard to say you've got it all or this is the same experience for a hearing public, because it's not. I'm interested in that difference of accessible as in you can access what I've made or accessible as in you can really, really understand very easily what I've made quickly, but like I say, it's not about understanding in that way, it's more to experience it and that's what to me, accessibility should be more about, can you access the experience of the show, the experience I'm trying to make.

**DT:** Otherwise, you're in danger of patronising people, aren't you? If your definition of accessibility is simplifying and dumbing things down, it's going to be very clear in the work.

**HS:** Sometimes people use that term within spoken word, say that spoken word needs to be accessible, you need to understand it at first hearing, and people have good arguments for that, but it's not the way I'm interested in working, because it's not about understanding in terms of cracking the meaning of something immediately, but more understanding in terms of experiencing and communicating something, even if that's an emotion.

**DT:** If anyone wants to come and see your show, and they should definitely want to, it's on until the 26 November 2017, is that right?

**HS:** 2016. It's hard enough performing every night for three weeks, you want me to do it for a year? West End transfer, coming up. There are some post-show discussions next week. There is one on accessibility, one that asks why would a deaf audience member want to see a hearing artist sign badly? It's tongue-in-cheek. There's one on mainstream poetry and feminist art and one on censorship.

**DT:** This chat's going out on the 21<sup>st</sup>, so you've got five days to get your act together and go and see Hannah. Thank you very much, Hannah.

**HS:** Thank you.

**Part two (00:27:14):**

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Nick Makoha – **NM**

**DT:** Next up is Nick Makoha. We met up at the Poetry School in Lambeth, South London to chat about professionalism, Nick's development as a writer and poetry's place in society. Nick's new collection, *The Kingdom Of Gravity*, will be published by Peepal Tree Press. Here's Nick.

**Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.**

**DT:** Thank you very much, Nick, for joining me. There's a faint echo in the Poetry School, but hopefully it won't turn out too badly. How are you doing? You're a pretty hard-working poet and I really appreciate you finding time. Can we start with your own development as a writer, what method you use and what you think is important?

**NM:** I think being a writer is a journey of self-actualisation. It's hard to accept being a writer. At first it's just a hobby and then at some point, I wanted to make it more than just a hobby. I remember when I was a young performance poet, I used to work with many other poets you might know, Jacob Sam-La Rose, Cat Francois, Roger Robinson. We'd perform, be on the circuit at poetry nights, there used to be this great poetry night at the Dog Star, run by Fatima Keller and there were loads of other nights.

We were literally like pilgrims, travelling from spoken-word event to spoken-word event and that was OK when it was just a hobby, but the minute I started to take it on as a career, where I was leading workshops and also wanting to create my own work, I had to find a way of keeping that alive. Poetry School was one of those places that allowed me to work on my craft, it allowed me to meet new writers. It's actually where I was part of a writers' collective called Malika's Kitchen, actually where Writers' Kitchen used to meet, well, one of the venues, we also used to meet at the South Bank Centre.

Initially, we used to meet in Malika's Kitchen House every Friday, but when it became more of a tangible, a serious thing, because it wasn't just us and our friends, it was also other writers, the place became an important place every Friday. Malika led it, Roger Robinson led it, Jacob Sam-La Rose led it and I led it for a while. It was important to me to help the writers, who were my peers at the time, but also other young writers come up, people like Innua Ellams, quite a few names.

**DT:** Malika's Kitchen gets mentioned a lot on this podcast. The more people I speak to, the more I realise how important that space was.

**NM:** Still is.

**DT:** Many people have passed through.

**NM:** They still meet here. It's six degrees of separation. If you know someone, they probably know Malika or they probably have or know someone who's in Malika's Kitchen. It's an important space to grow, to build your voice - I think it allowed me to build my own personal voice - build your confidence, build your reading. Many writers underestimate the importance of reading, but just things you like, things you don't like, things you don't understand, things beyond your realm of thinking.

**DT:** Is it writing groups and those methods that lead you to working with new writers? Do you feel an obligation, having had that benefit?

**NM:** I think it's just in my nature, I don't think it's an obligation.

**DT:** Obligation's too strong a word.

**NM:** It's like planting a tree. You don't just plant a tree and walk away. You want to build a forest. I want to be a good writer, but I want to be a good writer among other great writers. I don't want to leave a situation worse than the one I founded, so I hope when my time is done as a writer, there will be avenues for other writers that weren't necessarily there for us when we were starting out. I think it's vital because there's no direct pathway to be a poet or writer of any description, there's no 'oh, you should do this, you should do that, this will work'.

We have to find a way to integrate those internal avenues and to make structures that allow writers to develop, but also allow a writer to live. It's a vocation, but it's an important one. We don't have a poet laureate just for the fun of it. Many important occasions are celebrated through poetry. A death is celebrated with a poem, a birth, a wedding. These are high-point occasions in the human experience and it's important we as writers take ourselves seriously.

**DT:** Are they the only times poetry shows itself as being really important?

**NM:** I think those are the times when the world at large identifies with poetry. I think poetry sits all over our society. It moves through it fluidly, but I think at these types of occasions, we acknowledge that we need something beyond the usual use of language to express our joy, our fear, our pain. It's something everyone can do because we all speak the language, but also it's something that needs to be mastered. I could cut meat but I can't be a surgeon.

You're going to have to school me on that one. I think poets in the same way have to realise I can write a poem, but actually I want to write better poems, read better poems. It does something, it's an important vocation.

**DT:** Talking about challenging yourself, can you talk about what you were up to today, how that course is running?

**NM:** Yeah, I'm actually on Mimi Khalvati's Versification course. We're in our third semester of a three-semester series. It's been tough, it's been eye-opening. Her course came at the right time. It's a highly-pursued course, I was on a waiting list, it took me four years to get on board and even with this course, I'm only really touching the surface of what Versification is.

How does one write a poem? What form do they use? What does lineation do? Conversations that we have in normal workshops, Mimi really just helps us see the next layer. It's pretty much like sitting with an oracle. It's been very helpful. I enjoy our group, it's quite a tight-knit unit, very supportive.

**DT:** The gist of the course is that you're encouraged to try different forms, but also give some indication of how to do it correctly.

**NM:** With anything, there are so many different ways to skin a cat. Mimi gives you a really good definition of, for example, sonnets. We looked at sonnets, she gives you really good examples of contemporary ones, of old, the origins, we get an origins story, then we go to work at looking at what it actually takes to do. Every two weeks we have to bring in a body of work. It's challenging. Sometimes, you can see yourself avoiding it because in this day and age, it's easier – well, I don't know if it's easier – but we deviate towards free verse and she was showing us actually free verse in itself is a form. We have to understand its boundaries and its limitations and its rules.

It's been good to get a comprehensive understanding of verse in that way. I'd say a lot of my poems in the last year and a half, I have to thank her, because I've been on two of her courses, Advanced Poetry and Versification. I have to thank her for coming to some kind of learning and schooling with advanced poetry.

**DT:** Even if you're minded to constantly push yourself, it can still be hard to find avenues to go down. There's a lot of received wisdom in writing to form, isn't there? You get examples passed down but to get proper insight into why a form has been used, it's important to know its limitations in order to experiment.

**NM:** I'll be honest, I feared form, partly because of my ignorance, then when you come to understand it, you fear it because you're 'can I do it?' because you're learning, but it's like learning how to walk. I guess I'm in my infant stages with form, but I'm enjoying the work it brings and the ways it makes you think. It shows you the possibility of language, because there's normal language, our everyday speech, and there's what poetry can do. That's another language. I want to delve into that.

I don't want to just be throwing platitudes or common-day phrases, I want to say what else can I do? How else can I connect? At the end of the day, I'm trying to make it available to many different types of readership, people who love poetry, but have never heard of it before. They're 'what is this? It's poetry?' and then there are people who have an African sensibility, I want to talk into that, and my own personal work, like that poem I've just read, Basketball, I want to talk to athletes.

**DT:** It's important to know you can still talk to 'normal people' through form. It's condescending to think if you have to talk to the masses, you have to simplify.

**NM:** Everything's a form. We see form all the time and we don't disrupt it. Getting on a train, that's a form. Trains look a certain way, we don't go 'hmm, I don't know if I can get onto this, I'm free verse'. You get your cereal in a square packet, that's a form. We don't go 'why

isn't this round? I don't understand.' Form is not made to be inhibitive, what it's made to do, it's a limitation in one sense, but it makes other things available in another and I think that second part, we often miss out as young, even some experienced writers miss out what this form makes available.

When a martial artist says 'you know what, I want to devote a year of my life to making my body stronger and more lithe, there is a gain there'. He'll say 'I can't eat doughnuts' or whatever, but he gains something. Form allows a muscularity to your work. Also at the same time, it gives a flexibility. There's more you can do in the creation of a poem.

**DT:** I think we'll take a second reading.

### **Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.**

**DT:** I'm interested to know – and this is an endlessly cyclical conversation – what makes you a professional poet and writer?

**NM:** By using myself as my example. Ten years ago, I was working for a bank and every evening, or as many evenings as I could in a week, I would reach out to my friends who are also poets, or my friends who aren't poets, and invite them to come with me to poetry readings. I would write a poem as and when I feel, inspired by whatever moves me, they liked it, I liked it, there was nothing. Then it moved from that to wanting to make it a career, in other words, making it something I could earn money from, make a difference in the world with.

I think to do that, there needs to be a level of professionalism. On one level, I need to find a way to create better work, or generate more work, or generate work that isn't just inspired by how I'm feeling on a certain day. That might be commissions. How do I become the writer they want to commission? How do I become the writer that leads a poetry workshop? I had to learn how to lead workshops, which is what I did for a while, with Jacob, when he and my friend Peter Carne, London Teenage Poetry Slam, they were working with several poets, working with kids, teaching them slam poetry in schools.

We all had a school we were attached to and worked with, a class of kids. We chose eight kids from that class, they had to learn two poems, they had to be three minutes' long, they had to compete with one another on a community building day, then we eventually had a final, then the winning school get to go to Chicago. How do you become the kind of coach who can empower kids who've probably never heard of poetry, don't like poetry, prefer music, don't like music? How do you inspire them and sometimes even turn their lives around, totally, to becoming people who are on stage, talking in front of a crowd, who are seeing a possibility for themselves beyond the possibilities many people around them have?

So there's that and how do you have longevity? The poetry scene is a small space, but the international poetry world is a large space. How do I, as an African poet living in London, have a dialogue with African poets around the world, African poets in Africa, poets in America?

How does that work translate for example into my one-man show? The skills I started to learn as a poet, I started developing them to make a one-person show.

How I see professionalism is, you know what, how do I become more business-like, to be the person who, when I look at my tax return, I can say this work here, this money I earned here was through my work as a poet and playwright, or educator within the field? Does that make sense?

**DT:** Absolutely. Not answering isn't a lack of engagement, it's one of those things you can go backwards and forwards all night. I just wanted to hear how you define it. For those who may have just tuned into this episode, if you go back in the archive a few episodes, we have a discussion led by Paula Varjak around transparency between artists, fees and money. A large part of that conversation was about what it means to be professional.

**NM:** I did a workshop for the Arts Council. They invited me to talk to writers of colour about applying to the Arts Council. What hit me as a surprise and shock is that many artists don't apply and I think part of that, and I put myself in this at one point, is naivety. We don't actually know the game. We don't know how to move as a professional artist. What does it take? What does it take to make an application?

We live in a different sphere. I'm not like a doctor who gets paid a certain fee every year regardless of what they do. I have to rely on commissions, I have to rely on workshops, I have to rely on funding to build projects, I have to design projects and be a project manager as well as a poet. At the same time, you have to develop yourself, just as a doctor does, going back to the doctor analogy, or even a mechanic, you have to keep learning new skills. I have to keep my skills relevant.

How do I keep my reading relevant? My library up-to-date? Even your health. Because I'm self-employed, OK, we have the NHS, but how do you make sure your health is right? If somebody hires me, I can't be sick and say 'I can't do it today'. If they hire me for the day, they need me, so all of that is levels of professionalism. Sometimes, actually a lot of times, people misconstrue. They say 'How do you earn your money?' I earn my money by being professional, by creating opportunities, by networking, by going to events and talking to people who might inspire me with ideas so I can push what can be done through poetry.

**DT:** It's quite often missed, the fact that to be a professional creative involves quite a lot of creating your own work. There's an obligation on us to create opportunities for ourselves. There's definitely a worthwhile conversation to be had about why certain people feel there are barriers in front of them, but in general, as artists, we need to be more open to the fact we have to make people aware there is work to be done, especially in this current economic climate.

There are not people wandering around with bags of money, asking for poems. There is money there, but you might have to suggest your practice is worth their investment.

**NM:** A lot of people don't understand the importance of poetry. When we were running the London Teenage Poetry Slam, people didn't understand how this project was going to

transform lives, but many of those young people have gone on to do great things. One of the interns on the London Teenage Poetry Slam ended up being the second Young Poet Laureate, so you don't know who you're meeting or where you're meeting these people or what they can end up being. I think professionalism is needed in any field, but particularly in the field of poetry, it's something that helps in a lot of those grey areas.

There are a lot of grey areas in the world of poetry. In the music industry, they have a lot more structure. I can write a song, I can distribute my song and I can get paid or I can re-mix a song and get paid for that, whereas as a poet, there's no hard and fast rule. Fees are negotiable, What is my rate I can show? How much do I need to earn? When do I file my tax return? All of that information. Boring but once you handle it, it makes you able to be there year in, year out.

I want to make a difference. I want my son and daughter to look in my eyes and say 'You know what, I'm really proud of what my father does and you know what? I want to go for my dreams.' Their dreams may not be my dreams, but I want to see that. A, the language is important, it's the universal connector, the universal solution. Without language, we're at war, we're in confusion. B, I want them to enjoy it. It's something to be enjoyed. When language is shared, it's an intimate connection.

**DT:** You mentioned earlier you've got a book coming up.

**NM:** I've got a few things in the pipeline. I've been working with Goldsmiths on a project and Creative Works London called the Black Metic Experience. A metic is a person, it's a term for a slave, but when they were freed, they had the rights of free people but not the full rights of a citizen, so I want to find out what's the Black Metic experience for poets in England. I've compared it with some poets in America, we've out some videos together, we're going to be editing those and putting them out, so I'm working alongside Goldsmiths with that. I've been the creative entrepreneur there.

I'm also working on my first full collection, which will be out on People Tree Press in April, called the Kingdom Of Gravity. The last poem I read to you was one of the poems from that collection. A while back, First Generation The Complete Works, while I was on the Complete Works, I started working on my first one-man show, called My Father and Other Superheroes. It's toured quite widely across England, but in the time they will reach you, I'll have just performed it in New York for the United Solo Festival, which is the largest solo festival in the world.

**DT:** We'll put a link to the website for the show and endeavour to retweet and share.

**NM:** I did a pamphlet called The Second Republic, which is part of an anthology series called Next Generation Poets. African Poets. I was in the first generation, along with people like Warsan Shire. I'm doing a performance for the publisher there when I'm in America. When I come back, Callaloo, which is a poetry journal in America, they're having their annual conference, which will be in Oxford from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 28<sup>th</sup> and I'll be doing a reading there on the Thursday, which I think is the 26<sup>th</sup> of November. It's all on the website.

**DT:** We'll finish with another reading.

**NM:** Let me give you the title poem from the book. It's called the Kingdom Of Gravity and it will be out on People Tree Press.

**Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.**

**DT:** Thanks very much, Nick.

**NM:** It's been a pleasure. I'm looking forward to hearing it online.

### **Part three:**

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: John Hegley – **JH**

**DT:** We'll finish off with a chat with one of my favourite performers, John Hegley. This section begins with two songs and ends with two poems, before John pops back up to read a final poem for a friend, so stay tuned right to the end. Here's the wonderful John Hegley.

**Apologies, we are unable to reproduce these songs/poems at this time.**

**DT:** Thanks for joining us, John.

**JH:** Who's we?

**DT:** Ever since I started this project, I've been using the plural. It is strictly speaking 'us', because it's me and my partner Lizzy, but it is mainly me. Lizzy offers more emotional support than editing help. One of the things that attracted me most to spoken word was that feeling of community when you come to read for the first time and it felt like it should be everybody's series. As long as I get to make all the decisions.

**JH:** I understand.

**DT:** It's quite a good start, because I wanted to add a note and couldn't work out how to form it into a question, but when I first started reading, I had no frame of reference...

**JH:** I thought you were going to say you had no friends.

**DT:** Sort of. I was desperately trying to impress people. I had no frame of reference for how to read in public. I kept hearing this voice and realised I was sort of doing an impression

of you. It was either going to be that or Victoria Wood, because these were the voices running through my head. I tried to convince myself I wasn't copying anyone, that we just had the same references. What voices were most attractive to you when you were younger?

**JH:** Mr Brennan, our teacher, read out Tarantella, Hilaire Belloc's poem. I wish I could hear again how he read it out. You'd be hard-pressed not to get rhythmized up with those words, 'the bedding and the spreading of the straw for a bedding, the fleas that tease in the High Pyrenees.' That's almost a voice without anybody speaking it. In terms of persons, Spike Milligan when I was a youngster, but I don't know how much I heard of him doing poems, it was reading.

John Cooper Clarke. The first time I saw John Cooper Clarke's stuff was in the NME, actually, rather than hearing him. I thought 'this is fantastic'. That was about 1979. It wasn't just the rhythm, it was the voice, also the voice of a poetry that was pop. Pop in the best way pop can be,

Many years later, I heard Edwin Morgan's version of Cyrano de Bergerac in Glasgow rhyming dialect. That was fantastic, to hear that. I heard a song, I think it was Georges Brassens, do you say? Not quite sure how it's pronounced, but I heard 'les croquantes et les croquantes' in the 90s and I thought that was amazing. They're obviously different words and I don't know what it means, but hearing those two things was really important. Also, when I was at university, there was a company called Red Ladder and they came to the university. I remember one of them doing it in one of the speeches, and there they all were, writing his mighting, and I really liked that.

**DT:** When I was younger, I used to train my radio into French radio, wondering if it was meant to rhyme and have that lyrical sound around it. It's nice, having that seeming nonsense.

**JH:** It's music. You could say in terms of meaning, music is nonsense. It's non-sense. When I went to perform in Colombia at Medellin Festival, I heard a chap called César Lopez perform, Chilean I think, he was amazing. I couldn't understand a word, but he conjured up nights in the city with his words. He signed a book for me and one day, I want somebody to tell me what it all says.

**DT:** You mentioned Spike Milligan. I wonder what influence those comedians had. I've heard him read poetry, but even in his humour, there's a lot of nonsense and rhyme.

**JH:** Yes. I did actually do a performance with him at the Almeida Theatre some years ago. It's daft. So that was a good thing to be influenced by. Poetry can be daft. John Cooper Clarke, the poetry can be pop. Seamus Heaney, the poetry can make the word have an amazing weight. If you can get all those three things, you can't always get them in one thing, but daft, pop, weighty daft pop.

**DT:** Is it a British thing to be so daft with poetry? You don't get it in Scandinavia.

**JH:** I don't know. There's the Kurt Schwitters' thing that Michael Horovitz does about the sneezing. It's a poem about sneezing and that's got a daftness about it. We – we – are said to

be an eccentric lot of people, those on this island. That's mainly to do with an islanders' thing, isn't it? But I think there's a sense of humour.

When I went to the Ledbury Poetry Festival, I think it was Charles who was one of the originators of that festival, said to me, because I was saying, as you know, it's quite cerebral, some of the poetry that's there, I was talking about placing myself, how am I placed alongside such things. He said 'there's not poetry. There's poet trees.' It was such an enlightening thing to be told. Then there's not humour, there's humours, ah the humours, there are four of them.

**DT:** Part of the founding idea of this podcast was not to try and be an expert on anything. I hope I show I'm trying to learn myself. It was quite a revelation when I first went to a decent-size reading and saw people doing all different stuff in the same room. I knew there were different styles, but I felt if you wanted to do one sort of thing, you had to go over there, and this particular style didn't belong there, but it's quite refreshing. Most places are quite open to it.

**JH:** Somebody asked me last night what I thought was the definition of performance poetry. It was a poet himself in Canterbury. Did I think it was a delineated space? Did I think it was a justified title at all? Doesn't all poetry meld in? I did say there are some things that are a bit of both, but there are certain things, like the Kurt Schwitters sneezing poem is a piece to be performed. There are pieces that are to be performed, but that doesn't mean, and this is what I said to the chap last night, it doesn't mean that it has to be on one level. It can be ambiguous.

**DT:** Leading up to meeting you today, I refreshed my memory by reading your writing and I found there's an old BBC Schools programme called English Time.

**JH:** I don't know all the things that are on.

**DT:** It's in three parts.

**JH:** Really? It was really lovely doing that with Nigel.

**DT:** It must be quite old because the You Tube clip is of a period where you can only upload eight minutes at a time. You made a comment about trying to defy people's expectations in terms of performance and if they expect comedy, you go a bit drier. Is that something you still do? Why was it important?

**JH:** You've got to keep yourself on your toes as well, so if you're going to go about thinking 'I'll challenge people's expectations', you're not challenging your own because your expectation is always 'I'm going to challenge somebody else's'. You've got to be wary. Sometimes I do that.

Last night was an interesting thing, I did a bit of sitting down and just had a mike for standing up because it's quite a big stage. There was one mic at the side and then a chair and table and then two mics there, one for the mandolin. When I went over to the standing-up mike, I'd

been a bit dry, as you might say, then I started to do some of the brother-in-law poems, which are a bit livelier and almost a bit stand-up-ier. It was interesting having that actual physical delineation. Stand-up poetry and sit-down poetry.

**DT:** I want to talk about the comedy side and link it in to music. In the programme, you talk about lyrical writing enabling you to find a more deliberate way to rhyme, bending words in the same way you used to fit to the melody.

**JH:** Comedic things can be well placed and necessary when the comedy is necessary, when it underlines, when it emphasises. The uses of comedy are many, I make people laugh. I saw the idea of Complicite in 1984 and they did, I think the show was called A Minute Too Late, and it was a show about dying, somebody who'd died, and there was great touchingness in it, but it was wonderful, wonderful comedy. I would say that was an influence as well, seeing both sides of the coin.

**DT:** The deliberate breaking of rhyme schemes is a really comedic tool, isn't it?

**JH:** Yeah, but again, keep doing that and it's expected, so you can't keep doing that.

**DT:** I'm interested to know how you got started. Through music?

**JH:** Music, certainly. I always sang before I played, so I was in a choir in Luton and I loved to sing in church. I used to go round singing at Christmas on my own, singing carols. I'd sing the whole four verses, a lot of them I knew by heart, so you got your money's worth. I used to come home with pockets full of money. Singing was always important and I did love the little bit of poetry I was exposed to. I loved the playground rhymes.

There was one about television programmes at the time:

'Bronco Layne had a pain, so they sent for Wagon Train.  
Wagon Train was no good, so they sent for Robin Hood.  
Robin Hood killed a man, so they sent for big Cheyenne.  
Big Shy Am CHECK was having tea, so they sent for Laramie.  
Laramie lost his cargo so they sent for Wells Fargo.'

I think it went on. That being populist. I think it was quite an exceptional thing, to have a rhyme about something cultural we knew as kids. Now, that cultural comment is a big part of poetry, or of some poetry.

**DT:** Another thing you mentioned on the English Time programme was how you felt like more of an observational poet, rather than writing about feelings.

**JH:** Maybe that's changed a little bit. My brother says somebody was saying something once to him about me, I don't know what he was saying, 'he's not as funny as he used to be' or something, I don't know what they said, but he said, 'it's more considered, what he's writing at the moment'. There is that. Does that come with age? I don't know. Expressing emotional things...

I was talking to somebody the other night about how at the Lyric Hammersmith, we did this thing about English culture and we had a lot of things about Morris dancing and deckchairs in the sandpit, and those things that aren't solely English, but you put your head through them at the seaside, so the thing was a celebration of an idea, as always, let's say just an idea, of English culture. I said to Benita, she's a publicist, there we are, give the publicist the publicity, I said 'we gave everybody a hankie' and she said 'and then you made them cry'.

We actually didn't, but what a beautiful thought. It was to make a rabbit with one ear, that was the reason, and also because of the hankies and Morris dancing, but what a beautiful thought, to give the audience hankies and then to make them cry.

**DT:** You made me think of clowning. Reading your book last week, there's a lot of longing, it seemed to me, talking about the childhood poems, unattainable love, that kind of feeling. This act of trying to get people to laugh at the situation, then draw them in. The hankie –I'm probably over-thinking this - is the joke or gesture, then the sharing of the emotion afterwards.

**JH:** I suppose it is. There is a joke. You're right, I see it truly as clowning, because you see the sadness in the clown, but the clown has a costume and props, so the hankie is a prop, so there is a vaudeville. There's a lovely song by the Demolition Decorators, called We Are Holy Vaudevillians, a very beautiful song. They were very poetic in their songs and one attempts to be that.

**DT:** You're still gigging a lot and must see a lot of younger poets coming along. Is there a fashion to give too much immediately? If we give everything immediately on stage, what part do the audience play?

**JH:** Why can't you give loads?

**DT:** Obviously, you can give a lot. I'm wondering what role the audience play in that.

**JH:** When we were working on the Soap Box Theatre, when I was starting out in Forest Gate, we used to have loads of joining-in stuff. The first company I worked for was Interaction and that's always been in my stuff, interactive stuff. Also because I worked on the street, you had to get the audience to be involved and engaged.

When I was working at Soap Box, I carried on that interactive thing. We'd get them rowing the boat to America and all the kids would help you row the boat and always had some part to play, which came out of a thing called the Game Play, which was a thing that Interaction started. The drama adviser Alan Black for Redbridge, having seen our show, said 'It's fantastic, all this participation you do, but you can get them to participate emotionally as well'.

It's not exactly an answer, but it's in this area. Going back to what you're saying, you get on stage, do loads and loads, yeah, so the answer to that is 'shut up' sometimes. Leave a space. I guess that's it. Then start again.

**DT:** Now the way of reaching out to people, you don't necessarily have to get out on the streets. You can have your You Tube channel, reach people globally, but in that sense, if you've only got a camera, you're perhaps more inclined to give everything because you're not getting an immediate response. Maybe it's grown out of that.

**JH:** Maybe. It's interesting, you saying that. It made me realise that my answer was to do with having an audience in front of me, even though I have done radio and TV. Nowhere near as much as I've done live. I was completely framing my answers in that way.

**DT:** That's why I wanted to talk about the influences. I presume most of your spoken-word influences would have been in front of audiences, even radio programmes. So even when you heard just a voice on the radio, you'd still hear the laughter and hear the pauses of the entertainer waiting for the reaction. We'll finish with a couple of readings.

**JH:** OK.

**Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.**

Now, subsequently, I feel justice isn't done saying that about Dad. So this is called Straightening The Record and this is in this new book, Peace, Love and Potatoes, beautifully produced by Profile Books. £9.95.

**Apologies, we are unable to reproduce this poem at this time.**

**DT:** Thanks very much.

**JH:** Thank you.

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**End of transcript.**